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VOL. 839.

ARMADALE BY WILKIE COLLINS

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. 2.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

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VOL. II.

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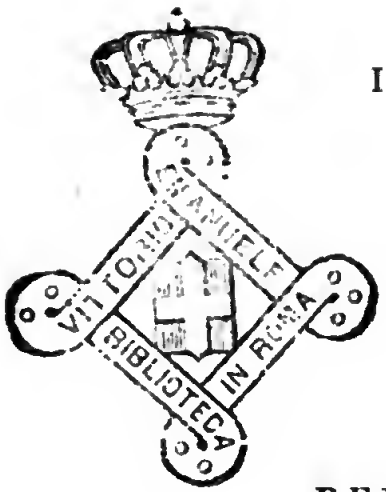
ARMADALE.

BY

WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN IN WHITE," ETC.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1866.

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ARMADALE.

BOOK THE SECOND.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER VII.

The Plot Thickens.

Two messages were waiting for Allan when he returned to the house. One had been left by Midwinter. "He had gone out for a long walk, and Mr. Armadale was not to be alarmed if he did not get back till late in the day." The other message had been left by "a person from Mr. Pedgift's office," who had called, according to appointment, while the two gentlemen were away at the major's. "Mr. Bashwood's respects, and he would have the honour of waiting on Mr. Armadale again, in the course of the evening."

Towards five o'clock, Midwinter returned, pale and silent. Allan hastened to assure him that his peace was made at the cottage; and then, to change the subject, mentioned Mr. Bashwood's message. Midwinter's mind was so pre-occupied or so languid, that he hardly seemed to remember the name. Allan was obliged to remind him that Bashwood was the elderly clerk, whom Mr. Pedgift had sent to be his instructor in the duties of

the steward's office. He listened without making any remark, and withdrew to his room, to rest till dinner-time.

Left by himself, Allan went into the library, to try if he could while away the time over a book.

He took many volumes off the shelves, and put a few of them back again — and there he ended. Miss Milroy contrived in some mysterious manner to get, in this case, between the reader and the books. Her formal bow, and her merciless parting speech, dwelt, try how he might to forget them, on Allan's mind; he began to grow more and more anxious as the idle hour wore on, to recover his lost place in her favour. To call again that day at the cottage, and ask if he had been so unfortunate as to offend her, was impossible. To put the question in writing with the needful nicety of expression, proved, on trying the experiment, to be a task beyond his literary reach. After a turn or two up and down the room, with his pen in his mouth, he decided on the more diplomatic course (which happened, in this case, to be the easiest course too,) of writing to Miss Milroy as cordially as if nothing had happened, and of testing his position in her good graces by the answer that she sent him back. An invitation of some kind (including her father, of course, but addressed directly to herself) was plainly the right thing to oblige her to send a written reply — but here the difficulty occurred of what the invitation was to be. A ball was not to be thought of, in his present position with the resident gentry. A dinner-party, with no indispensable elderly lady on the premises to receive Miss Milroy — except Mrs. Gripper, who could only receive her in the kitchen — was equally out of the

question. What was the invitation to be? Never backward, when he wanted help, in asking for it right and left in every available direction, Allan, feeling himself at the end of his own resources, coolly rang the bell, and astonished the servant who answered it, by inquiring how the late family at Thorpe-Ambrose used to amuse themselves, and what sort of invitations they were in the habit of sending to their friends.

"The family did what the rest of the gentry did, sir," said the man, staring at his master in utter bewilderment. "They gave dinner-parties and balls. And, in fine summer weather, sir, like this, they sometimes had lawn-parties and picnics ——"

"That'll do!" shouted Allan. "A picnic's just the thing to please her. Richard, you're an invaluable man — you may go downstairs again."

Richard retired wondering, and Richard's master seized his ready pen.

"Dear Miss Milroy, — Since I left you, it has suddenly struck me that we might have a picnic. A little change and amusement (what I should call a good shaking-up, if I wasn't writing to a young lady) is just the thing for you, after being so long indoors lately in Mrs. Milroy's room. A picnic is a change, and (when the wine is good) amusement too. Will you ask the major if he will consent to the picnic, and come? And if you have got any friends in the neighbourhood who like a picnic, pray ask them too — for I have got none. It shall be your picnic, but I will provide everything and take everybody. You shall choose the day,

and we will picnic where you like. I have set my heart on this picnic.

"Believe me, ever yours,

"ALLAN ARMADALE."

On reading over his composition, before sealing it up, Allan frankly acknowledged to himself, this time, that it was not quite faultless. "'Picnic' comes in a little too often," he said. "Never mind — if she likes the idea, she won't quarrel with that." He sent off the letter on the spot, with strict instructions to the messenger to wait for a reply.

In half-an-hour the answer came back on scented paper, without an erasure anywhere, fragrant to smell and beautiful to see.

The presentation of the naked truth is one of those exhibitions from which the native delicacy of the female mind seems instinctively to revolt. Never were the tables turned more completely than they were now turned on Allan by his fair correspondent. Machiavelli himself would never have suspected, from Miss Milroy's letter, how heartily she had repented her petulance to the young squire as soon as his back was turned, and how extravagantly delighted she was when his invitation was placed in her hands. Her letter was the composition of a model young lady whose emotions are all kept under parental lock and key, and served out for her judiciously as occasion may require. "Papa" appeared quite as frequently in Miss Milroy's reply as "picnic" had appeared in Allan's invitation. "Papa" had been as considerately kind as Mr. Armadale, in wishing to procure her a little change and amusement,

and had offered to forego his usual quiet habits, and join the picnic. With "papa's" sanction, therefore, she accepted, with much pleasure, Mr. Armadale's proposal; and, at "papa's" suggestion, she would presume on Mr. Armadale's kindness, to add two friends of theirs, recently settled at Thorpe-Ambrose, to the picnic party — a widow lady and her son; the latter in holy orders and in delicate health. If Tuesday next would suit Mr. Armadale, Tuesday next would suit "papa" — being the first day he could spare from repairs which were required by his clock. The rest, by "papa's" advice, she would beg to leave entirely in Mr. Armadale's hands; and, in the meantime, she would remain, with "papa's" compliments, Mr. Armadale's truly — "ELEANOR MILROY."

Who would ever have supposed that the writer of that letter had jumped for joy when Allan's invitation arrived? Who would ever have suspected that there was an entry already in Miss Milroy's diary, under that day's date, to this effect: — "The sweetest, dearest letter from *I-know-who;* I'll never behave unkindly to him again as long as I live?" As for Allan, he was charmed with the success of his manœuvre. Miss Milroy had accepted his ivitation — consequently, Miss Milroy was not offended with him. It was on the tip of his tongue to mention the correspondence to his friend when they met at dinner. But there was something in Midwinter's face and manner (even plain enough for Allan to see) which warned him to wait a little before he said anything to revive the painful subject of their visit to the cottage. By common consent they both avoided all topics connected with Thorpe-Ambrose — not even the visit from Mr. Bashwood,

which was to come with the evening, being referred to by either of them. All through the dinner they drifted farther and farther back into the old endless talk of past times about ships and sailing. When the butler withdrew from his attendance at table, he came downstairs with a nautical problem on his mind, and asked his fellow-servants if they any of them knew the relative merits "on a wind," and "off a wind," of a schooner and a brig.

The two young men had sat longer at table than usual that day. When they went out into the garden, with their cigars, the summer twilight fell grey and dim on lawn and flower-bed, and narrowed round them by slow degrees the softly-fading circle of the distant view. The dew was heavy; and, after a few minutes in the garden, they agreed to go back to the drier ground on the drive in front of the house.

They were close to the turning which led into the shrubbery, when there suddenly glided out on them, from behind the foliage, a softly-stepping black figure — a shadow, moving darkly through the dim evening light. Midwinter started back at the sight of it, and even the less finely-strung nerves of his friend were shaken for the moment.

"Who the devil are you!" cried Allan.

The figure bared its head in the grey light, and came slowly a step nearer. Midwinter advanced a step on his side, and looked closer. It was the man of the timid manners and the mourning garments, of whom he had asked the way to Thorpe-Ambrose where the three roads met.

"Who are you?" repeated Allan.

"I humbly beg your pardon, sir," faltered the

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stranger, stepping back again confusedly. "The servants told me I should find Mr. Armadale ——"

"What, are you Mr. Bashwood?"

"Yes, if you please, sir."

"I beg your pardon for speaking to you so roughly," said Allan, "but the fact is, you rather startled me. My name is Armadale (put on your hat, pray), and this is my friend, Mr. Midwinter, who wants your help in the steward's office."

"We hardly stand in need of an introduction," said Midwinter. "I met Mr. Bashwood out walking a few days since, and he was kind enough to direct me when I had lost my way."

"Put on your hat," reiterated Allan, as Mr. Bashwood, still bareheaded, stood bowing speechlessly, now to one of the young men, and now to the other. "My good sir, put on your hat, and let me show you the way back to the house. Excuse me for noticing it," added Allan, as the man, in sheer nervous helplessness, let his hat fall, instead of putting it back on his head; "but you seem a little out of sorts — a glass of good wine will do you no harm before you and my friend come to business. Whereabouts did you meet with Mr. Bashwood, Midwinter, when you lost your way?"

"I am too ignorant of the neighbourhood to know. I must refer you to Mr. Bashwood."

"Come, tell us where it was," said Allan, trying, a little too abruptly, to set the man at his ease, as they all three walked back to the house.

The measure of Mr. Bashwood's constitutional timidity seemed to be filled to the brim by the loudness of Allan's voice, and the bluntness of Allan's request. He ran over in the same feeble flow of words with

which he had deluged Midwinter on the occasion when they first met.

"It was on the road, sir," he began, addressing himself alternately to Allan, whom he called "sir," and to Midwinter, whom he called by his name, "I mean, if you please, on the road to Little Gill Beck. A singular name, Mr. Midwinter, and a singular place; I don't mean the village; I mean the neighbourhood — I beg your pardon, I mean the 'Broads,' beyond the neighbourhood. Perhaps you may have heard of the Norfolk Broads, sir? What they call lakes in other parts of England, they call Broads here. The Broads are quite numerous; I think they would repay a visit. You would have seen the first of them, Mr. Midwinter, if you had walked on a few miles from where I had the honour of meeting you. Remarkably numerous, the Broads, sir — situated between this and the sea. About three miles from the sea, Mr. Midwinter, — about three miles. Mostly shallow, sir, with rivers running between them. Beautiful; solitary. Quite a watery country, Mr. Midwinter; quite separate as it were, in itself. Parties sometimes visit them, sir, — pleasure-parties in boats. It's quite a little network of lakes, or, perhaps, — yes, perhaps more correctly, pools. There is good sport in the cold weather. The wild-fowl are quite numerous. Yes. The Broads would repay a visit, Mr. Midwinter, the next time you are walking that way. The distance from here to Little Gill Beck, and then from Little Gill Beck to Girdler Broad, which is the first you come to, is altogether not more ——" In sheer nervous inability to leave off, he would apparently have gone on talking of the Norfolk Broads for the rest of the evening, if one of his two listeners had not

unceremoniously cut him short before he could find his his way into a new sentence.

"Are the Broads within an easy day's drive there and back, from this house?" asked Allan; feeling, if they were, that the place for the picnic was discovered already.

"Oh, yes, sir; a nice drive — quite a nice easy drive from this beautiful place!"

They were by this time ascending the portico steps; Allan leading the way up, and calling to Midwinter and Mr. Bashwood to follow him into the library, where there was a lighted lamp.

In the interval which elapsed before the wine made its appearance, Midwinter looked at his chance acquaintance of the high-road with strangely-mingled feelings of compassion and distrust — of compassion that strengthened in spite of him; of distrust that persisted in diminishing, try as he might to encourage it to grow. There, perched comfortless on the edge of his chair, sat the poor broken-down nervous wretch, in his worn black garments, with his watery eyes, his honest old outspoken wig, his miserable mohair stock, and his false teeth that were incapable of deceiving anybody — there he sat, politely ill at ease; now shrinking in the glare of the lamp, now wincing under the shock of Allan's sturdy voice; a man with the wrinkles of sixty years in his face, and the manners of a child in the presence of strangers; an object of pity surely, if ever there was a pitiable object yet!

"Whatever else you're afraid of, Mr. Bashwood," cried Allan, pouring out a glass of wine, "don't be afraid of that! There isn't a headache in a hogshead of it! Make yourself comfortable; I'll leave you and

Mr. Midwinter to talk your business over by yourselves. It's all in Mr. Midwinter's hands; he acts for me, and settles everything at his own discretion."

He said those words with a cautious choice of expression very uncharacteristic of him, and without further explanation, made abruptly for the door. Midwinter, sitting near it, noticed his face as he went out. Easy as the way was into Allan's favour, Mr. Bashwood, beyond all kind of doubt, had in some unaccountable manner failed to find it!

The two strangely-assorted companions were left together — parted widely, as it seemed on the surface, from any possible interchange of sympathy; drawn invisibly one to the other, nevertheless, by those magnetic similarities of temperament which overleap all difference of age or station, and defy all apparent incongruities of mind and character. From the moment when Allan left the room, the hidden Influence that works in darkness began slowly to draw the two men together, across the great social desert which had lain between them up to this day.

Midwinter was the first to approach the subject of the interview.

"May I ask," he began, "if you have been made acquainted with my position here, and if you know why it is that I require your assistance?"

Mr. Bashwood — still hesitating and still timid, but manifestly relieved by Allan's departure — sat farther back in his chair, and ventured on fortifying himself with a modest little sip of wine.

"Yes, sir," he replied; "Mr. Pedgift informed me of all — at least I think I may say so — of all the

circumstances. I am to instruct, or perhaps I ought to say to advise ——"

"No, Mr. Bashwood; the first word was the best word of the two. I am quite ignorant of the duties which Mr. Armadale's kindness has induced him to intrust to me. If I understand right, there can be no question of your capacity to instruct me, for you once filled a steward's situation yourself. May I inquire where it was?"

"At Sir John Mellowship's, sir, in West Norfolk Perhaps you would like — I have got it with me — to see my testimonial? Sir John might have dealt more kindly with me — but I have no complaint to make; it's all done and over now!" His watery eyes looked more watery still, and the trembling in his hands spread to his lips as he produced an old dingy letter from his pocket-book, and laid it open on the table.

The testimonial was very briefly and very coldly expressed, but it was conclusive as far as it went. Sir John considered it only right to say that he had no complaint to make of any want of capacity or integrity in his steward. If Mr. Bashwood's domestic position had been compatible with the continued performance of his duties on the estate, Sir John would have been glad to keep him. As it was, embarrassments caused by the state of Mr. Bashwood's personal affairs had rendered it undesirable that he should continue in Sir John's service; and on that ground, and that only, his employer and he had parted. Such was Sir John's testimony to Mr. Bashwood's character. As Midwinter read the last lines, he thought of another testimonial, still in his own possession — of the written character which they had given him at the school, when they turned their

sick usher adrift in the world. His superstition (distrusting all new events and all new faces at Thorpe-Ambrose) still doubted the man before him as obstinately as ever. But when he now tried to put those doubts into words, his heart upbraided him, and he laid the letter on the table in silence.

The sudden pause in the conversation appeared to startle Mr. Bashwood. He comforted himself with another little sip of wine, and, leaving the letter untouched, burst irrepressibly into words, as if the silence was quite unendurable to him.

"I am ready to answer any question, sir," he began. "Mr. Pedgift told me that I must answer questions, because I was applying for a place of trust. Mr. Pedgift said, neither you nor Mr. Armadale were likely to think the testimonial sufficient of itself. Sir John doesn't say — he might have put it more kindly, but I don't complain — Sir John doesn't say what the troubles were that lost me my place. Perhaps you might wish to know —?" He stopped confusedly, looked at the testimonial, and said no more.

"If no interests but mine were concerned in the matter," rejoined Midwinter, "the testimonial would, I assure you, be quite enough to satisfy me. But while I am learning my new duties, the person who teaches me will be really and truly the steward of my friend's estate. I am very unwilling to ask you to speak on what may be a painful subject, and I am sadly inexperienced in putting such questions as I ought to put; but perhaps, in Mr. Armadale's interests, I ought to know something more, either from yourself, or from Mr. Pedgift, if you prefer it —" He, too, stopped confusedly, looked at the testimonial, and said no more.

There was another moment of silence. The night was warm, and Mr. Bashwood, among his other misfortunes, had the deplorable infirmity of perspiring at the palms of the hands. He took out a miserable little cotton pocket-handkerchief, rolled it up into a ball, and softly dabbed it to and fro, from one hand to the other, with the regularity of a pendulum. Performed by other men, under other circumstances, the action might have been ridiculous. Performed by this man, at the crisis of the interview, the action was horrible.

"Mr. Pedgift's time is too valuable, sir, to be wasted on me," he said. "I will mention what ought to be mentioned myself — if you will please to allow me. I have been unfortunate in my family. It was very hard to bear, though it seems not much to tell. My wife —" One of his hands closed fast on the pocket-handkerchief; he moistened his dry lips, struggled with himself, and went on.

"My wife, sir," he resumed, "stood a little in my way; "she did me (I am afraid I must confess) some injury with Sir John. Soon after I got the steward's situation she contracted — she took — she fell into habits (I hardly know how to say it) of drinking. I couldn't break her of it, and I couldn't always conceal it from Sir John's knowledge. She broke out, and — and tried his patience once or twice, when he came to my office on business. Sir John excused it, not very kindly; but still he excused it. I don't complain of Sir John; I — I don't complain, now, of my wife." He pointed a trembling finger at his miserable crape-covered beaver hat on the floor. "I'm in mourning for her," he said, faintly. "She died nearly a year ago, in the county asylum here."

His mouth began to work convulsively. He took up the glass of wine at his side, and, instead of sipping it this time, drained it to the bottom. "I'm not much used to wine, sir," he said, conscious, apparently, of the flush that flew into his face as he drank, and still observant of the obligations of politeness amid all the misery of the recollections that he was calling up.

"I beg, Mr. Bashwood, you will not distress yourself by telling me any more," said Midwinter, recoiling from any further sanction on his part of a disclosure which had already bared the sorrows of the unhappy man before him to the quick.

"I'm much obliged to you, sir," replied Mr. Bashwood. "But if I don't detain you too long, and if you will please to remember that Mr. Pedgift's directions to me were very particular — and, besides, I only mentioned my late wife because if she hadn't tried Sir John's patience to begin with, things might have turned out differently —" He paused, gave up the disjointed sentence in which he had involved himself, and tried another. "I had only two children, sir," he went on, advancing to a new point in his narrative; "a boy and a girl. The girl died when she was a baby. My son lived to grow up — and it was my son who lost me my place. I did my best for him; I got him into a respectable office in London. They wouldn't take him without security. I'm afraid it was imprudent; but I had no rich friends to help me — and I became security. My boy turned out badly, sir. He — perhaps you will kindly understand what I mean, if I say he behaved dishonestly. His employers consented, at my entreaty, to let him off without prosecuting. I begged very hard — I was fond of my son James — and I took him

home, and did my best to reform him. He wouldn't stay with me; he went away again to London; he — I beg your pardon, sir! I'm afraid I'm confusing things; I'm afraid I'm wandering from the point?"

"No, no," said Midwinter, kindly. "If you think it right to tell me this sad story, tell it in your own way. Have you seen your son since he left you to go London?"

"No, sir. He's in London still, for all I know. When I last heard of him, he was getting his bread — not very creditably. He was employed, under the Inspector, at the Private Inquiry Office in Shadyside Place."

He spoke those words — apparently (as events then stood) the most irrelevant to the matter in hand that had yet escaped him; actually (as events were soon to be) the most vitally important that he had uttered yet — he spoke those words absently, looking about him in confusion, and trying vainly to recover the lost thread of his narrative.

Midwinter compassionately helped him. "You were telling me," he said, "that your son had been the cause of your losing your place. How did that happen?"

"In this way, sir," said Mr. Bashwood, getting back again excitedly into the right train of thought. "His employers consented to let him off — but they came down on his security; and I was the man. I suppose they were not to blame; the security covered their loss. I couldn't pay it all out of my savings; I had to borrow — on the word of a man, sir, I couldn't help it — I had to borrow. My creditor pressed me; it seemed cruel, but, if he wanted the money, I suppose it was

only just. I was sold out of house and home. I daresay other gentlemen would have said what Sir John said; I daresay most people would have refused to keep a steward who had had the bailiffs after him, and his furniture sold in the neighbourhood. That was how it ended, Mr. Midwinter. I needn't detain you any longer — here is Sir John's address, if you wish to apply to him."

Midwinter generously refused to receive the address.

"Thank you kindly, sir," said Mr. Bashwood, getting tremulously on his legs. "There is nothing more, I think, except — except that Mr. Pedgift will speak for me, if you wish to inquire into my conduct in his service. I'm very much indebted to Mr. Pedgift; he's a little rough with me sometimes, but if he hadn't taken me into his office, I think I should have gone to the workhouse when I left Sir John, I was so broken-down." He picked up his dingy old hat from the floor. "I won't intrude any longer, sir. I shall be happy to call again, if you wish to have time to consider before you decide."

"I want no time to consider, after what you have told me," replied Midwinter warmly, his memory busy, while he spoke, with the time when *he* had told *his* story to Mr. Brock, and was waiting for a generous word in return, as the man before him was waiting now. "To-day is Saturday," he went on. "Can you come and give me my first lesson on Monday morning? I beg your pardon," he added, interrupting Mr. Bashwood's profuse expressions of acknowledgment, and stopping him on his way out of the room; "there is one thing we ought to settle, ought we not? We haven't spoken yet about your own interest in this

matter — I mean, about the terms." He referred a little confusedly to the pecuniary part of the subject. Mr. Bashwood (getting nearer and nearer to the door) answered him more confusedly still.

"Anything, sir — anything you think right. I won't intrude any longer — I'll leave it to you and Mr. Armadale."

"I will send for Mr. Armadale, if you like," said Midwinter, following him into the hall. "But I am afraid he has as little experience in matters of this kind as I have. Perhaps, if you see no objection, we might be guided by Mr. Pedgift?"

Mr. Bashwood caught eagerly at the last suggestion, pushing his retreat, while he spoke, as far as the front door. "Yes, sir — oh, yes, yes! nobody better than Mr. Pedgift. Don't—pray don't, disturb Mr. Armadale!" His watery eyes looked quite wild with nervous alarm as he turned round for a moment in the light of the hall-lamp, to make that polite request. If sending for Allan had been equivalent to unchaining a ferocious watch-dog, Mr. Bashwood could hardly have been more anxious to stop the proceeding. "I wish you kindly good evening, sir," he went on, getting out to the steps. "I'm much obliged to you. I will be scrupulously punctual on Monday morning — I hope — I think — I'm sure you will soon learn everything I can teach you. It's not difficult — oh, dear, no — not difficult at all! I wish you kindly good evening, sir. A beautiful night; yes, indeed, a beautiful night for a walk home."

With those words, all dropping out of his lips one on the top of the other, and without noticing, in his agony of embarrassment at effecting his departure,

Midwinter's outstretched hand, he went noiselessly down the steps, and was lost in the darkness of the night.

As Midwinter turned to re-enter the house, the dining-room door opened, and his friend met him in the hall.

"Has Mr. Bashwood gone?" asked Allan.

"He has gone," replied Midwinter, "after telling me a very sad story, and leaving me a little ashamed of myself for having doubted him without any just cause. I have arranged that he is to give me my first lesson in the steward's office on Monday morning."

"All right," said Allan. "You needn't be afraid, old boy, of my interrupting you over your studies. I daresay I'm wrong — but I don't like Mr. Bashwood."

"I daresay *I'm* wrong," retorted the other, a little petulantly. "I do."

The Sunday morning found Midwinter in the park, waiting to intercept the postman, on the chance of his bringing more news from Mr. Brock.

At the customary hour the man made his appearance, and placed the expected letter in Midwinter's hands. He opened it, far away from all fear of observation this time, and read these lines: —

"My dear Midwinter, — I write more for the purpose of quieting your anxiety than because I have anything definite to say. In my last hurried letter I had no time to tell you that the elder of the two women whom I met in the Gardens had followed me, and spoken to me in the street. I believe I may characterize what she said (without doing her any injustice) as a tissue of falsehoods from beginning to end.

At any rate, she confirmed me in the suspicion that some underhand proceeding is on foot, of which Allan is destined to be the victim, and that the prime mover in the conspiracy is the vile woman who helped his mother's marriage and who hastened his mother's death.

"Feeling this conviction, I have not hesitated to do, for Allan's sake, what I would have done for no other creature in the world. I have left my hotel, and have installed myself (with my old servant Robert) in a house opposite the house to which I traced the two women. We are alternately on the watch (quite unsuspected, I am certain, by the people opposite) day and night. All my feelings, as a gentleman and a clergyman, revolt from such an occupation as I am now engaged in; but there is no other choice. I must either do this violence to my own self-respect, or I must leave Allan, with his easy nature, and in his assailable position, to defend himself against a wretch who is prepared, I firmly believe, to take the most unscrupulous advantage of his weakness and his youth. His mother's dying entreaty has never left my memory; and, God help me, I am now degrading myself in my own eyes in consequence.

"There has been some reward already for the sacrifice. This day (Saturday) I have gained an immense advantage — I have at last seen the woman's face. She went out with her veil down as before; and Robert kept her in view, having my instructions, if she returned to the house, not to follow her back to the door. She did return to the house; and the result of my precaution was, as I had expected, to throw her off her guard. I saw her face unveiled at the window,

and afterwards again in the balcony. If any occasion should arise for describing her particularly, you shall have the description. At present I need only say that she looks the full age (five-and-thirty) at which you estimated her, and that she is by no means so handsome a woman as I had (I hardly know why) expected to see.

"This is all I can now tell you. If nothing more happens by Monday or Tuesday next, I shall have no choice but to apply to my lawyers for assistance; though I am most unwilling to trust this delicate and dangerous matter in other hands than mine. Setting my own feelings, however, out of the question, the business which has been the cause of my journey to London is too important to be trifled with much longer as I am trifling with it now. In any and every case, depend on my keeping you informed of the progress of events; and believe me

"Yours truly,

"Decimus Brock."

Midwinter secured the letter as he had secured the letter that preceded it — side by side in his pocket-book with the narrative of Allan's Dream.

"How many days more?" he asked himself, as he went back to the house. "How many days more?"

Not many. The time he was waiting for, was a time close at hand.

Monday came, and brought Mr. Bashwood, punctual to the appointed hour. Monday came, and found Allan immersed in his preparations for the picnic. He held a series of interviews, at home and abroad, all through

the day. He transacted business with Mrs. Gripper, with the butler, and with the coachman, in their three several departments of eating, drinking, and driving. He went to the town to consult his professional advisers on the subject of the Broads, and to invite both the lawyers, father and son (in the absence of anybody else in the neighbourhood whom he could ask), to join the picnic. Pedgift Senior (in his department) supplied general information, but begged to be excused from appearing at the picnic, on the score of business engagements. Pedgift Junior (in his department) added all the details; and, casting business engagements to the winds, accepted the invitation with the greatest pleasure. Returning from the lawyer's office, Allan's next proceeding was to go to the major's cottage and obtain Miss Milroy's approval of the proposed locality for the pleasure-party. This object accomplished, he returned to his own house, to meet the last difficulty now left to encounter — the difficulty of persuading Midwinter to join the expedition to the Broads.

On first broaching the subject, Allan found his friend impenetrably resolute to remain at home. Midwinter's natural reluctance to meet the major and his daughter, after what had happened at the cottage, might probably have been overcome. But Midwinter's determination not to allow Mr. Bashwood's course of instruction to be interrupted, was proof against every effort that could be made to shake it. After exerting his influence to the utmost, Allan was obliged to remain contented with a compromise. Midwinter promised, not very willingly, to join the party towards evening, at the place appointed for a gipsy tea-making, which was to close the proceedings of the day. To

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this extent he would consent to take the opportunity of placing himself on a friendly footing with the Milroys. More he could not concede, even to Allan's persuasion, and for more it would be useless to ask.

The day of the picnic came. The lovely morning, and the cheerful bustle of preparation for the expedition, failed entirely to tempt Midwinter into altering his resolution. At the regular hour he left the breakfast-table to join Mr. Bashwood in the steward's office. The two were quietly closeted over the books, at the back of the house, while the packing for the picnic went on in front. Young Pedgift (short in stature, smart in costume, and self-reliant in manner) arrived some little time before the hour for starting, to revise all the arrangements, and to make any final improvements which his local knowledge might suggest. Allan and he were still busy in consultation when the first hitch occurred in the proceedings. The woman-servant from the cottage was reported to be waiting below for an answer to a note from her young mistress, which was placed in Allan's hands.

On this occasion Miss Milroy's emotions had apparently got the better of her sense of propriety. The tone of the letter was feverish, and the handwriting wandered crookedly up and down, in deplorable freedom from all proper restraint.

"Oh, Mr. Armadale" (wrote the major's daughter), "such a misfortune! What *are* we to do? Papa has got a letter from grandmamma this morning about the new governess. Her reference has answered all the questions, and she's ready to come at the shortest notice. Grandmamma thinks (how provoking!) the sooner the better; and she says we may expect her —

I mean the governess — either to-day or to-morrow. Papa says (he *will* be so absurdly considerate to everybody!) that we can't allow Miss Gwilt to come here (if she comes to-day) and find nobody at home to receive her. What *is* to be done? I am ready to cry with vexation. I have got the worst possible impression (though grandmamma says she is a charming person) of Miss Gwilt. *Can* you suggest something, dear Mr. Armadale? I'm sure papa would give way if you could. Don't stop to write — send me a message back. I have got a new hat for the picnic; and oh, the agony of not knowing whether I am to keep it on or take it off. — Yours truly, E. M."

"The devil take Miss Gwilt!" said Allan, staring at his legal adviser in a state of helpless consternation.

"With all my heart, sir — I don't wish to interfere," remarked Pedgift Junior. "May I ask what's the matter?"

Allan told him. Mr. Pedgift the younger might have his faults, but a want of quickness of resource was not among them.

"There's a way out of the difficulty, Mr. Armadale," he said. "If the governess comes to-day, let's have her at the picnic."

Allan's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"All the horses and carriages in the Thorpe-Ambrose stables are not wanted for this small party of ours," proceeded Pedgift Junior. "Of course not! Very good. If Miss Gwilt comes to-day, she can't possibly get here before five o'clock. Good again. You order an open carriage to be waiting at the major's door at that time, Mr. Armadale; and I'll give the man his directions where to drive to. When the gov-

erness comes to the cottage, let her find a nice little note of apology (along with the cold fowl, or whatever else they give her after her journey) begging her to join us at the picnic, and putting a carriage at her own sole disposal to take her there. Gad, sir!" said young Pedgift, gaily, "she *must* be a Touchy One if she thinks herself neglected after that!"

"Capital!" cried Allan. "She shall have every attention. I'll give her the pony-chaise and the white harness, and she shall drive herself, if she likes."

He scribbled a line to relieve Miss Milroy's apprehensions, and gave the necessary orders for the pony-chaise. Ten minutes later, the carriages for the pleasure-party were at the door.

"Now we've taken all this trouble about her," said Allan, reverting to the governess as they left the house, "I wonder, if she does come to-day, whether we shall see her at the picnic!"

"Depends entirely on her age, sir," remarked young Pedgift, pronouncing judgment with the happy confidence in himself which eminently distinguished him. "If she's an old one, she'll be knocked up with the journey, and she'll stick to the cold fowl and the cottage. If she's a young one, either I know nothing of women, or the pony in the white harness will bring her to the picnic."

They started for the major's cottage.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Norfolk Broads.

The little group gathered together in Major Milroy's parlour to wait for the carriages from Thorpe-Ambrose would hardly have conveyed the idea to any previously uninstructed person introduced among them, of a party assembled in expectation of a picnic. They were almost dull enough, so far as outward appearances went, to have been a party assembled in expectation of a marriage.

Even Miss Milroy herself, though conscious of looking her best in her bright muslin dress and her gaily-feathered new hat, was at this inauspicious moment Miss Milroy under a cloud. Although Allan's note had assured her, in Allan's strongest language, that the one great object of reconciling the governess's arrival with the celebration of the picnic, was an object achieved, the doubt still remained whether the plan proposed — whatever it might be — would meet with her father's approval. In a word, Miss Milroy declined to feel sure of her day's pleasure until the carriage made its appearance and took her from the door. The major, on his side, arrayed for the festive occasion in a tight blue frock-coat which he had not worn for years, and threatened with a whole long day of separation from his old friend and comrade the clock, was a man out of his element, if ever such a man existed yet. As for the friends who had been asked at Allan's request — the widow lady (otherwise Mrs. Pentecost) and her son (the Reverend Samuel) in

delicate health — two people less capable, apparently, of adding to the hilarity of the day could hardly have been discovered in the length and breadth of all England. A young man who plays his part in society by looking on in green spectacles, and listening with a sickly smile, may be a prodigy of intellect and a mine of virtue, but he is hardly, perhaps, the right sort of man to have at a picnic. An old lady afflicted with deafness, whose one inexhaustible subject of interest is the subject of her son, and who (on the happily rare occasions when that son opens his lips) asks everybody eagerly, "What does my boy say?" is a person to be pitied in respect of her infirmities, and a person to be admired in respect of her maternal devotedness, but not a person, if the thing could possibly be avoided, to take to a picnic. Such a man, nevertheless, was the Reverend Samuel Pentecost, and such a woman was the Reverend Samuel's mother; and in the dearth of any other producible guests, there they were, engaged to eat, drink, and be merry for the day at Mr. Armadale's pleasure-party to the Norfolk Broads.

The arrival of Allan, with his faithful follower, Pedgift Junior, at his heels, roused the flagging spirits of the party at the cottage. The plan for enabling the governess to join the picnic, if she arrived that day, satisfied even Major Milroy's anxiety to show all proper attention to the lady who was coming into his house. After writing the necessary note of apology and invitation, and addressing it in her very best handwriting to the new governess, Miss Milroy ran upstairs to say good-by to her mother, and returned, with a smiling face and a side-look of relief directed at her father, to announce that there was nothing now to keep

any of them a moment longer indoors. The company at once directed their steps to the garden-gate, and were there met face to face by the second great difficulty of the day. How were the six persons of the picnic to be divided between the two open carriages that were in waiting for them?

Here, again, Pedgift Junior exhibited his invaluable faculty of contrivance. This highly-cultivated young man possessed in an eminent degree an accomplishment more or less peculiar to all the young men of the age we live in — he was perfectly capable of taking his pleasure without forgetting his business. Such a client as the Master of Thorpe-Ambrose fell but seldom in his father's way, and to pay special but unobtrusive attention to Allan all through the day, was the business of which young Pedgift, while proving himself to be the life and soul of the picnic, never once lost sight from the beginning of the merrymaking to the end. He had detected the state of affairs between Miss Milroy and Allan at a glance; and he at once provided for his client's inclinations in that quarter, by offering (in virtue of his local knowledge) to lead the way in the first carriage, and by asking Major Milroy and the curate if they would do him the honour of accompanying him.

"We shall pass a very interesting place to a military man, sir," said young Pedgift, addressing the major, with his happy and unblushing confidence, "the remains of a Roman encampment. And my father, sir, who is a subscriber," proceeded this rising lawyer, turning to the curate, "wished me to ask your opinion of the new Infant School buildings at Little Gill Beck. Would you kindly give it me, as we go along?" He

opened the carriage-door, and helped in the major and the curate, before they could either of them start any difficulties. The necessary result followed. Allan and Miss Milroy rode together in the same carriage, with the extra convenience of a deaf old lady in attendance to keep the squire's compliments within the necessary limits.

Never yet had Allan enjoyed such an interview with Miss Milroy as the interview he now obtained on the road to the Broads.

The dear old lady, after a little anecdote or two on the subject of her son, did the one thing wanting to secure the perfect felicity of her two youthful companions — she became considerately blind for the occasion, as well as deaf. A quarter of an hour after the carriage left the major's cottage, the poor old soul, reposing on snug cushions, and fanned by a fine summer air, fell peaceably asleep. Allan made love, and Miss Milroy sanctioned the manufacture of that occasionally precious article of human commerce, sublimely indifferent on both sides to a solemn base accompaniment on two notes, played by the curate's mother's unsuspecting nose. The only interruption to the love-making (the snoring being a thing more grave and permanent in its nature, was not interrupted at all) came at intervals from the carriage ahead. Not satisfied with having the major's Roman encampment and the curate's Infant Schools on his mind, Pedgift Junior rose erect from time to time in his place, and, respectfully hailing the hindmost vehicle, directed Allan's attention, in a shrill tenor voice, and with an excellent choice of language, to objects of interest on the road. The only way to quiet him was to answer, which

Allan invariably did by shouting back, "Yes, beautiful" — upon which young Pedgift disappeared again in the recesses of the leading carriage, and took up the Romans and the Infants where he had left them last.

The scene through which the picnic party was now passing, merited far more attention than it received either from Allan or Allan's friends.

An hour's steady driving from the major's cottage had taken young Armadale and his guests beyond the limits of Midwinter's solitary walk, and was now bringing them nearer and nearer to one of the strangest and loveliest aspects of Nature, which the inland landscape, not of Norfolk only, but of all England, can show. Little by little, the face of the country began to change as the carriage approached the remote and lonely district of the Broads. The wheat-fields and turnip-fields became perceptibly fewer; and the fat green grazing-grounds on either side grew wider and wider in their smooth and sweeping range. Heaps of dry rushes and reeds, laid up for the basket-maker and the thatcher, began to appear at the roadside. The old gabled cottages of the early part of the drive dwindled and disappeared, and huts with mud walls rose in their place. With the ancient church towers and the wind and water mills, which had hitherto been the only lofty objects seen over the low marshy flat, there now rose all round the horizon, gliding slow and distant behind fringes of pollard willows, the sails of invisible boats moving on invisible waters. All the strange and startling anomalies presented by an inland agricultural district, isolated from other districts by its

intricate surrounding network of pools and streams — holding its communications and carrying its produce by water instead of by land — began to present themselves in closer and closer succession. Nets appeared on cottage palings; little flat-bottomed boats lay strangely at rest among the flowers in cottage gardens; farmers' men passed to and fro clad in composite costume of the coast and the field, in sailors' hats and fishermen's boots, and ploughmen's smocks, — and even yet the low-lying labyrinth of waters, embosomed in its mystery of solitude, was a hidden labyrinth still. A minute more, and the carriages took a sudden turn from the hard high-road into a little weedy lane. The wheels ran noiseless on the damp and spongy ground. A lonely out-lying cottage appeared, with its litter of nets and boats. A few yards farther on, and the last morsel of firm earth suddenly ended in a tiny creek and quay. One turn more to the end of the quay — and there, spreading its great sheet of water, far and bright and smooth, on the right hand and the left — there, as pure in its spotless blue, as still in its heavenly peacefulness as the summer sky above it, was the first of the Norfolk Broads.

The carriages stopped, the love-making broke off, and the venerable Mrs. Pentecost, recovering the use of her senses at a moment's notice, fixed her eyes sternly on Allan the instant she woke.

"I see in your face, Mr. Armadale," said the old lady, sharply, "that you think I have been asleep."

The consciousness of guilt acts differently on the two sexes. In nine cases out of ten, it is a much more manageable consciousness with a woman than with a man. All the confusion, on this occasion, was

on the man's side. While Allan reddened and looked embarrassed, the quick-witted Miss Milroy instantly embraced the old lady with a burst of innocent laughter. "He is quite incapable, dear Mrs. Pentecost," said the little hypocrite, "of anything so ridiculous as thinking you have been asleep!"

"All I wish Mr. Armadale to know," pursued the old lady, still suspicious of Allan, "is, that my head being giddy, I am obliged to close my eyes in a carriage. Closing the eyes, Mr. Armadale, is one thing, and going to sleep is another. Where is my son?"

The Reverend Samuel appeared silently at the carriage-door, and assisted his mother to get out. ("Did you enjoy the drive, Sammy?" asked the old lady, "Beautiful scenery, my dear, wasn't it?") Young Pedgift, on whom all the arrangements for exploring the Broads devolved, bustled about, giving his orders to the boatman. Major Milroy, placid and patient, sat apart on an overturned punt, and privately looked at his watch. Was it past noon already? More than an hour past. For the first time, for many a long year, the famous clock at home had struck in an empty workshop. Time had lifted his wonderful scythe, and the corporal and his men had relieved guard, with no master's eye to watch their performances, with no master's hand to encourage them to do their best. The major sighed as he put his watch back in his pocket. "I'm afraid I'm too old for this sort of thing," thought the good man, looking about him dreamily. "I don't find I enjoy it as much as I thought I should. When are we going on the water, I wonder? where's Neelie?"

Neelie — more properly Miss Milroy — was behind one of the carriages with the promoter of the picnic.

They were immersed in the interesting subject of their own Christian names, and Allan was as near a point-blank proposal of marriage, as it is well possible for a thoughtless young gentleman of two-and-twenty to be.

"Tell me the truth," said Miss Milroy, with her eyes modestly riveted on the ground, "when you first knew what my name was, you didn't like it, did you?"

"I like everything that belongs to you," rejoined Allan, vigorously. "I think Eleanor is a beautiful name; and yet, I don't know why, I think the major made an improvement when he changed it to Neelie."

"I can tell you why, Mr. Armadale," said the major's daughter, with great gravity. "There are some unfortunate people in this world, whose names are — how can I express it? — whose names are, Misfits. Mine is a Misfit. I don't blame my parents, for of course it was impossible to know when I was a baby how I should grow up. But as things are, I and my name don't fit each other. When you hear a young lady called Eleanor, you think of a tall, beautiful, interesting creature directly — the very opposite of *me!* With my personal appearance, Eleanor sounds ridiculous — and Neelie, as you yourself remarked, is just the thing. No! no! don't say any more — I'm tired of the subject; I've got another name in my head, if we must speak of names, which is much better worth talking about than mine."

She stole a glance at her companion which said plainly enough, "The name is yours." Allan advanced a step nearer to her, and lowered his voice (without the slightest necessity,) to a mysterious whisper. Miss

Milroy instantly resumed her investigation of the ground. She looked at it with such extraordinary interest that a geologist might have suspected her of scientific flirtation with the superficial strata.

"What name are you thinking of?" asked Allan.

Miss Milroy addressed her answer, in the form of a remark, to the superficial strata — and let them do what they liked with it, in their capacity of conductors of sound, "If I had been a man," she said, "I should so like to have been called Allan!"

She felt his eyes on her as she spoke, and, turning her head aside, became absorbed in the graining of the panel at the back of the carriage. "How beautiful it is!" she exclaimed with a sudden outburst of interest in the vast subject of varnish. "I wonder how they do it?"

Man persists, and woman yields. Allan declined to shift the ground from love-making to coach-making. Miss Milroy dropped the subject.

"Call me by my name, if you really like it," he whispered persuasively. "Call me 'Allan,' for once — just to try."

She hesitated with a heightened colour and a charming smile, and shook her head. "I couldn't just yet," she answered softly.

"May I call you Neelie? Is it too soon?"

She looked at him again, with a sudden disturbance about the bosom of her dress, and a sudden flash of tenderness in her dark grey eyes.

"You know best," she said faintly, in a whisper.

The inevitable answer was on the tip of Allan's tongue. At the very instant, however, when he opened his lips, the abhorrent high tenor of Pedgift Junior,

shouting for "Mr. Armadale," rang cheerfully through the quiet air. At the same moment, from the other side of the carriage, the lurid spectacles of the Reverend Samuel showed themselves officiously on the search; and the voice of the Reverend Samuel's mother (who had, with great dexterity, put the two ideas of the presence of water and a sudden movement among the company together) inquired distractedly if anybody was drowned? Sentiment flies and Love shudders at all demonstrations of the noisy kind. Allan said, "Damn it," and rejoined young Pedgift. Miss Milroy sighed, and took refuge with her father.

"I've done it, Mr. Armadale!" cried young Pedgift, greeting his patron gaily. "We can all go on the water together; I've got the biggest boat on the Broads. The little skiffs," he added, in a lower tone, as he led the way to the quay steps, "besides being ticklish and easily upset, won't hold more than two, with the boatman; and the major told me he should feel it his duty to go with his daughter, if we all separated in different boats. I thought *that* would hardly do, sir," pursued Pedgift Junior, with a respectfully sly emphasis on the words. "And, besides, if we had put the old lady into a skiff, with her weight (sixteen stone if she's a pound), we might have had her upside down in the water half her time, which would have occasioned delay, and thrown what you call a damp on the proceedings. Here's the boat, Mr. Armadale. What do you think of it?"

The boat added one more to the strangely anomalous objects which appeared at the Broads. It was nothing less than a stout old lifeboat, passing its last declining years on the smooth fresh water, after the

stormy days of its youth-time on the wild salt sea. A comfortable little cabin for the use of fowlers in the winter season, had been built amidships, and a mast and sail adapted for inland navigation had been fitted forward. There was room enough and to spare for the guests, the dinner, and the three men in charge. Allan clapped his faithful lieutenant approvingly on the shoulder; and even Mrs. Pentecost, when the whole party were comfortably established on board, took a comparatively cheerful view of the prospects of the picnic. "If anything happens," said the old lady, addressing the company generally, "there's one comfort for all of us. My son can swim."

The boat floated out from the creek into the placid waters of the Broad; and the full beauty of the scene opened on the view.

On the northward and westward, as the boat reached the middle of the lake, the shore lay clear and low in the sunshine, fringed darkly at certain points by rows of dwarf trees; and dotted here and there, in the opener spaces, with windmills and reed-thatched cottages, of puddled mud. Southward, the great sheet of water narrowed gradually to a little group of close-nestling islands which closed the prospect; while to the east a long, gently undulating line of reeds followed the windings of the Broad, and shut out all view of the watery wastes beyond. So clear and so light was the summer air, that the one cloud in the eastern quarter of the heaven was the smoke-cloud left by a passing steamer three miles distant and more on the invisible sea. When the voices of the pleasure-party were still, not a sound rose far or near but the faint ripple at the bows, as the men, with slow deliberate

strokes of their long poles, pressed the boat forward softly over the shallow water. The world and the world's turmoil seemed left behind for ever on the land; the silence was the silence of enchantment — the delicious interflow of the soft purity of the sky and the bright tranquillity of the lake.

Established in perfect comfort in the boat — the major and his daughter on one side, the curate and his mother on the other, and Allan and young Pedgift between the two — the water party floated smoothly towards the little nest of islands at the end of the Broad. Miss Milroy was in raptures; Allan was delighted; and the major for once forgot his clock. Every one felt pleasurably, in their different ways, the quiet and beauty of the scene. Mrs. Pentecost, in her way, felt it like a clair-voyante — with closed eyes.

"Look behind you, Mr. Armadale," whispered young Pedgift. "I think the parson's beginning to enjoy himself."

An unwonted briskness — portentous apparently of coming speech — did certainly at that moment enliven the curate's manner. He jerked his head from side to side like a bird; he cleared his throat, and clasped his hands, and looked with a gentle interest at the company. Getting into spirits seemed, in the case of this excellent person, to be alarmingly like getting into the pulpit.

"Even in this scene of tranquillity," said the Reverend Samuel, coming out softly with his first contribution to the society, in the shape of a remark, "the Christian mind — led, so to speak, from one extreme to another — is forcibly recalled to the unstable nature of all earthly enjoyments. How, if this calm should

not last? How, if the winds rose and the waters became agitated?"

"You needn't alarm yourself about that, sir," said young Pedgift; "June's the fine season here — and you can swim."

Mrs. Pentecost (mesmerically affected in all probability by the near neighbourhood of her son) opened her eyes suddenly, and asked with her customary eagerness, "What does my boy say?"

The Reverend Samuel repeated his words in the key that suited his mother's infirmity. The old lady nodded in high approval, and pursued her son's train of thought through the medium of a quotation.

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Pentecost, with infinite relish. "He rides the whirlwind, Sammy, and directs the storm!"

"Noble words!" said the Reverend Samuel. "Noble and consoling words?"

"I say," whispered Allan, "if he goes on much longer in that way, what's to be done?"

"I told you, papa, it was a risk to ask them," added Miss Milroy, in another whisper.

"My dear!" remonstrated the major. "We knew nobody else in the neighbourhood; and as Mr. Armadale kindly suggested our bringing our friends, what could we do?"

"We can't upset the boat," remarked young Pedgift, with sardonic gravity. "It's a lifeboat, unfortunately. May I venture to suggest putting something into the reverend gentleman's mouth, Mr. Armadale? It's close on three o'clock. What do you say to ringing the dinner-bell, sir?"

Never was the right man more entirely in the right

place than Pedgift Junior at the picnic. In ten minutes more the boat was brought to a standstill among the reeds; the Thorpe-Ambrose hampers were unpacked on the roof of the cabin; and the current of the curate's eloquence was checked for the day.

How inestimably important in its moral results — and therefore how praiseworthy in itself — is the act of eating and drinking! The social virtues centre in the stomach. A man who is not a better husband, father, and brother, after dinner than before, is, digestively speaking, an incurably vicious man. What hidden charms of character disclose themselves, what dormant amiabilities awaken when our common humanity gathers together to pour out the gastric juice! At the opening of the hampers from Thorpe-Ambrose, sweet Sociability (offspring of the happy union of Civilization and Mrs. Gripper) exhaled among the boating party, and melted in one friendly fusion the discordant elements of which that party had hitherto been composed. Now did the Reverend Samuel Pentecost, whose light had hitherto been hidden under a bushel, prove at last that he could do something, by proving that he could eat. Now did Pedgift Junior shine brighter than ever he had shone yet, in gems of caustic humour and exquisite fertilities of resource. Now did the squire, and the squire's charming guest, prove the triple connection between Champagne that sparkles, Love that grows bolder, and Eyes whose vocabulary is without the word No. Now did cheerful old times come back to the major's memory, and cheerful old stories not told for years find their way to the major's lips. And now did Mrs. Pentecost, coming out wakefully in the whole force of her estimable maternal

character, seize on a supplementary fork, and ply that useful instrument incessantly between the choicest morsels in the whole round of dishes, and the few vacant places left available on the Reverend Samuel's plate. "Don't laugh at my son," cried the old lady, observing the merriment which her proceedings produced among the company. "It's my fault, poor dear — *I* make him eat!" And there are men in this world who, seeing virtues such as these developed at the table, as they are developed nowhere else, can, nevertheless, rank the glorious privilege of dining with the smallest of the diurnal personal worries which necessity imposes on mankind — with buttoning your waistcoat, for example, or lacing your stays! Trust no such monster as this with your tender secrets, your loves and hatreds, your hopes and fears. His heart is uncorrected by his stomach, and the social virtues are not in him.

The last mellow hours of the day and the first cool breezes of the long summer evening had met, before the dishes were all laid waste, and the bottles as empty as bottles should be. This point in the proceedings attained, the picnic party looked lazily at Pedgift Junior to know what was to be done next. That inexhaustible functionary was equal as ever to all the calls on him. He had a new amusement ready before the quickest of the company could so much as ask him what that amusement was to be.

"Fond of music on the water, Miss Milroy?" he asked in his airiest and pleasantest manner.

Miss Milroy adored music, both on the water and the land — always excepting the one case when she was practising the art herself on the piano at home.

"We'll get out of the reeds first," said young Pedgift. He gave his orders to the boatmen — dived briskly into the little cabin — and reappeared with a concertina in his hand. "Neat, Miss Milroy, isn't it?" he observed, pointing to his initials, inlaid on the instrument in mother-of-pearl. "My name's Augustus, like my father's. Some of my friends knock off the 'A,' and call me 'Gustus Junior.' A small joke goes a long way among friends, doesn't it, Mr. Armadale? I sing a little, to my own accompaniment, ladies and gentlemen; and, if quite agreeable, I shall be proud and happy to do my best."

"Stop!" cried Mrs. Pentecost; "I doat on music."

With this formidable announcement, the old lady opened a prodigious leather-bag, from which she never parted night or day, and took out an ear-trumpet of the old fashioned kind — something between a key bugle and a French horn. "I don't care to use the thing generally," explained Mrs. Pentecost, "because I'm afraid of it's making me deafer than ever. But I can't and won't miss the music. I doat on music. If you'll hold the other end, Sammy, I'll stick it in my ear. Neelie, my dear, tell him to begin."

Young Pedgift was troubled with no nervous hesitation; he began at once — not with songs of the light and modern kind, such as might have been expected from an amateur of his age and character — but with declamatory and patriotic bursts of poetry, set to the bold and blatant music which the people of England loved dearly at the earlier part of the present century, and which, whenever they can get it, they love dearly still. "The Death of Marmion," "The Battle of the Baltic," "The Bay of Biscay," "Nelson," under various

vocal aspects, as exhibited by the late Braham — these were the songs in which the roaring concertina and strident tenor of Gustus Junior exulted together. "Tell me when you're tired, ladies and gentlemen," said the minstrel solicitor. "There's no conceit about *me*. Will you have a little sentiment by way of variety? Shall I wind up with 'The Mistletoe Bough,' and 'Poor Mary Anne?'"

Having favoured his audience with those two cheerful melodies, young Pedgift respectfully requested the rest of the company to follow his vocal example in turn; offering, in every case, to play "a running accompaniment" impromptu, if the singer would only be so obliging as to favour him with the key-note.

"Go on, somebody!" cried Mrs. Pentecost eagerly. "I tell you again, I doat on music. We haven't had half enough yet, have we, Sammy?"

The Reverend Samuel made no reply. The unhappy man had reasons of his own — not exactly in his bosom, but a little lower — for remaining silent, in the midst of the general hilarity and the general applause. Alas for humanity! Even maternal love is alloyed with mortal fallibility. Owing much already to his excellent mother, the Reverend Samuel was now additionally indebted to her for a smart indigestion.

Nobody, however, noticed as yet the signs and tokens of internal revolution in the curate's face. Everybody was occupied in entreating everybody else to sing. Miss Milroy appealed to the founder of the feast. "Do sing something, Mr. Armadale," she said; "I should so like to hear you!"

"If you once begin, sir," added the cheerful Pedgift, "you'll find it get uncommonly easy as you go

on. Music is a science which requires to be taken by the throat at starting."

"With all my heart," said Allan, in his good-humoured way. "I know lots of tunes, but the worst of it is the words escape me. I wonder if I can remember one of Moore's Melodies? My poor mother used to be fond of teaching me Moore's Melodies when I was a boy."

"Whose melodies?" asked Mrs. Pentecost. "Moore's? Aha! I know Tom Moore by heart."

"Perhaps, in that case, you will be good enough to help me, ma'am, if my memory breaks down," rejoined Allan. "I'll take the easiest melody in the whole collection, if you'll allow me. Everybody knows it — 'Eveleen's Bower.'"

"I'm familiar, in a general sort of way, with the national melodies of England, Scotland, and Ireland," said Pedgift Junior. "I'll accompany you, sir, with the greatest pleasure. This is the sort of thing, I think." He seated himself cross-legged on the roof of the cabin, and burst into a complicated musical improvisation, wonderful to hear — a mixture of instrumental flourishes and groans; a jig corrected by a dirge, and a dirge enlivened by a jig. "That's the sort of thing," said young Pedgift, with his smile of supreme confidence. "Fire away, sir!"

Mrs. Pentecost elevated her trumpet, and Allan elevated his voice. "Oh, weep for the hour when to Eveleen's Bower ——" He stopped; the accompaniment stopped; the audience waited. "It's a most extraordinary thing," said Allan; "I thought I had the next line on the tip of my tongue, and it seems to have escaped me.

I'll begin again, if you have no objection. 'Oh, weep for the hour when to Eveleen's Bower——'"

"'The lord of the valley with false vows came,'" said Mrs. Pentecost.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Allan. "Now I shall get on smoothly. 'Oh, weep for the hour when to Eveleen's Bower, the lord of the valley with false vows came. The moon was shining bright'——"

"No!" said Mrs. Pentecost.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," remonstrated Allan. "'The moon was shining bright'——"

"The moon wasn't doing anything of the kind," said Mrs. Pentecost.

Pedgift Junior, foreseeing a dispute, persevered *sotto voce* with the accompaniment, in the interests of harmony.

"Moore's own words, ma'am," said Allan, "in my mother's copy of the Melodies."

"Your mother's copy was wrong," retorted Mrs. Pentecost. "Didn't I tell you just now that I knew Tom Moore by heart?"

Pedgift Junior's peace-making concertina still flourished and groaned, in the minor key.

"Well, what *did* the moon do?" asked Allan, in despair.

"What the moon *ought* to have done, sir, or Tom Moore wouldn't have written it so," rejoined Mrs. Pentecost. "'The moon hid her light from the heaven that night, and wept behind her clouds o'er the maiden's shame!' I wish that young man would leave off playing," added Mrs. Pentecost, venting her rising irritation on Gustus Junior. "I've had enough of him — he tickles my ears."

"Proud, I'm sure, ma'am," said the unblushing Pedgift. "The whole science of music consists in tickling the ears."

"We seem to be drifting into a sort of argument," remarked Major Milroy, placidly. "Wouldn't it be better if Mr. Armadale went on with his song?"

"Do go on, Mr. Armadale!" added the major's daughter. "Do go on Mr. Pedgift!"

"One of them doesn't know the words, and the other doesn't know the music," said Mrs. Pentecost. "Let them go on if they can!"

"Sorry to disappoint you, ma'am," said Pedgift Junior; "I'm ready to go on, myself, to any extent. Now, Mr. Armadale!"

Allan opened his lips to take up the unfinished melody where he had last left it. Before he could utter a note, the curate suddenly rose, with a ghastly face, and a hand pressed convulsively over the middle region of his waistcoat.

"What's the matter?" cried the whole boating party in chorus.

"I am exceedingly unwell," said the Reverend Samuel Pentecost.

The boat was instantly in a state of confusion. "Eveleen's Bower" expired on Allan's lips, and even the irrepressible concertina of Pedgift was silenced at last. The alarm proved to be quite needless. Mrs. Pentecost's son possessed a mother, and that mother had a bag. In two seconds, the art of medicine occupied the place left vacant in the attention of the company by the art of music.

"Rub it gently, Sammy," said Mrs. Pentecost. "I'll get out the bottles and give you a dose. It's his

poor stomach, major. Hold my trumpet, somebody — and stop the boat. You take that bottle, Neelie, my dear; and you take this one, Mr. Armadale; and give them to me as I want them. Ah, poor dear, I know what's the matter with him! Want of power *here*, major — cold, acid and flabby. Ginger to warm him; soda to correct him; salvolatile to hold him up. There, Sammy! drink it before it settles — and then go and lie down, my dear, in that dog-kennel of a place they call the cabin. No more music!" added Mrs. Pentecost, shaking her forefinger at the proprietor of the concertina — "unless it's a hymn, and that I don't object to."

Nobody appearing to be in a fit frame of mind for singing a hymn, the all-accomplished Pedgift drew upon his stores of local knowledge, and produced a new idea. The course of the boat was immediately changed under his direction. In a few minutes more, the company found themselves in a little island-creek, with a lonely cottage at the far end of it, and a perfect forest of reeds closing the view all round them.

"What do you say, ladies and gentlemen, to stepping on shore and seeing what a reed-cutter's cottage looks like?" suggested young Pedgift.

"We say, yes, to be sure," answered Allan. "I think our spirits have been a little dashed by Mr. Pentecost's illness and Mrs. Pentecost's bag," he added, in a whisper to Miss Milroy. "A change of this sort is the very thing we want to set us all going again."

He and young Pedgift handed Miss Milroy out of the boat. The major followed. Mrs. Pentecost sat immovable as the Egyptian Sphinx, with her bag on

her knees, mounting guard over "Sammy" in the cabin.

"We must keep the fun going, sir," said Allan, as he helped the major over the side of the boat. "We haven't half done yet with the enjoyment of the day."

His voice seconded his hearty belief in his own prediction to such good purpose, that even Mrs. Pentecost heard him, and ominously shook her head.

"Ah!" sighed the curate's mother. "If you were as old as I am, young gentleman, you wouldn't feel quite so sure of the enjoyment of the day!"

So, in rebuke of the rashness of youth, spoke the caution of age. The negative view is notoriously the safe view, all the world over — and the Pentecost philosophy is, as a necessary consequence, generally in the right.

CHAPTER IX.

Fate or Chance?

It was close on six o'clock when Allan and his friends left the boat; and the evening influence was creeping already, in its mystery and its stillness, over the watery solitude of the Broads.

The shore in these wild regions was not like the shore elsewhere. Firm as it looked, the garden-ground in front of the reed-cutter's cottage was floating ground, that rose and fell and oozed into puddles under the pressure of the foot. The boatmen who guided the visitors warned them to keep the path, and pointed through gaps in the reeds and pollards to grassy places, on which strangers would have walked confidently,

where the crust of earth was not strong enough to bear the weight of a child over the unfathomed depths of slime and water beneath. The solitary cottage, built of planks pitched black, stood on ground that had been steadied and strengthened by resting it on piles. A little wooden tower rose at one end of the roof, and served as a look-out post in the fowling season. From this elevation the eye ranged far and wide over a wilderness of winding water and lonesome marsh. If the reed-cutter had lost his boat, he would have been as completely isolated from all communication with town or village, as if his place of abode had been a light-vessel instead of a cottage. Neither he nor his family complained of their solitude, or looked in any way the rougher or the worse for it. His wife received the visitors hospitably, in a snug little room, with a raftered ceiling, and windows which looked like windows in a cabin on board ship. His wife's father told stories of the famous days when the smugglers came up from the sea at night, rowing through the network of rivers with muffled oars till they gained the lonely Broads, and sunk their spirit casks in the water, far from the coastguard's reach. His wild little children played at hide-and-seek with the visitors; and the visitors ranged in and out of the cottage, and round and round the morsel of firm earth on which it stood, surprised and delighted by the novelty of all they saw. The one person who noticed the advance of the evening — the one person who thought of the flying time and the stationary Pentecosts in the boat — was young Pedgift. That experienced pilot of the Broads looked askance at his watch, and drew Allan aside at the first opportunity.

"I don't wish to hurry you, Mr. Armadale," said Pedgift Junior; "but the time is getting on, and there's a lady in the case."

"A lady?" repeated Allan.

"Yes, sir," rejoined young Pedgift. "A lady from London; connected (if you'll allow me to jog your memory) with a pony-chaise and white harness."

"Good heavens, the governess!" cried Allan; "why, we have forgotten all about her!"

"Don't be alarmed, sir; there's plenty of time, if we only get into the boat again. This is how it stands, Mr. Armadale. We settled, if you remember, to have the gipsy tea-making at the next 'Broad' to this — Hurle Mere?"

"Certainly," said Allan. "Hurle Mere is the place where my friend Midwinter has promised to come and meet us."

"Hurle Mere is where the governess will be, sir, if your coachman follows my directions," pursued young Pedgift. "We have got nearly an hour's punting to do, along the twists and turns of the narrow waters (which they call The Sounds here) between this and Hurle Mere; and according to my calculations we must get on board again in five minutes, if we are to be in time to meet the governess and to meet your friend."

"We mustn't miss my friend, on any account," said Allan; "or the governess either, of course. I'll tell the major."

Major Milroy was at that moment preparing to mount the wooden watch-tower of the cottage to see the view. The ever useful Pedgift volunteered to go up with him, and rattle of all the necessary local explanations in half the time which the reed-cutter would

occupy in describing his own neighbourhood to a stranger.

Allan remained standing in front of the cottage, more quiet and more thoughtful than usual. His interview with young Pedgift had brought his absent friend to his memory for the first time since the picnic party had started. He was surprised that Midwinter, so much in his thoughts on all other occasions, should have been so long out of his thoughts now. Something troubled him, like a sense of self-reproach, as his mind reverted to the faithful friend at home, toiling hard over the steward's books, in his interests and for his sake. "Dear old fellow," thought Allan, "I shall be so glad to see him at the Mere; the day's pleasure won't be complete till he joins us!"

"Should I be right or wrong, Mr. Armadale, if I guessed that you were thinking of somebody?" asked a voice softly behind him.

Allan turned, and found the major's daughter at his side. Miss Milroy (not unmindful of a certain tender interview which had taken place behind a carriage) had noticed her admirer standing thoughtfully by himself, and had determined on giving him another opportunity, while her father and young Pedgift were at the top of the watch-tower.

"You know everything," said Allan smiling. "I *was* thinking of somebody."

Miss Milroy stole a glance at him — a glance of gentle encouragement. There could be but one human creature in Mr. Armadale's mind after what had passed between them that morning! It would be only an act of mercy to take him back again at once to the inter-

rupted conversation of a few hours since on the subject of names.

"I have been thinking of somebody too," she said, half inviting, half repelling the coming avowal. "If I tell you the first letter of my Somebody's name, will you tell me the first letter of yours?"

"I will tell you anything you like," rejoined Allan with the utmost enthusiasm.

She still shrank coquettishly from the very subject that she wanted to approach. "Tell me your letter first," she said in low tones, looking away from him.

Allan laughed. "M," he said, "is my first letter."

She started a little. Strange that he should be thinking of her by her surname instead of her Christian name — but it mattered little as long as he *was* thinking of her.

"What is your letter?" asked Allan.

She blushed and smiled. "A — if you will have it!" she answered in a reluctant little whisper. She stole another look at him, and luxuriously protracted her enjoyment of the coming avowal once more. "How many syllables is the name in?" she asked, drawing patterns shyly on the ground with the end of her parasol.

No man with the slightest knowledge of the sex would have been rash enough, in Allan's position, to tell her the truth. Allan, who knew nothing whatever of women's natures, and who told the truth right and left in all mortal emergencies, answered as if he had been under examination in a court of justice.

"It's a name in three syllables," he said.

Miss Milroy's downcast eyes flashed up at him like

lightning. "Three!" she repeated in the blankest astonishment.

Allan was too inveterately straightforward to take the warning even now. "I'm not strong at my spelling, I know," he said, with his light-hearted laugh. "But I don't think I'm wrong in calling Midwinter a name in three syllables. I was thinking of my friend — but never mind my thoughts. Tell me who A is — tell me who *you* were thinking of?"

"Of the first letter of the alphabet, Mr. Armadale, and I beg positively to inform you of nothing more!"

With that annihilating answer the major's daughter put up her parasol and walked back by herself to the boat.

Allan stood petrified with amazement. If Miss Milroy had actually boxed his ears (and there is no denying that she had privately longed to devote her hand to that purpose) he could hardly have felt more bewildered than he felt now. "What on earth have I done?" he asked himself helplessly, as the major and young Pedgift joined him, and the three walked down together to the waterside. "I wonder what she'll say to me next?"

She said absolutely nothing — she never so much as looked at Allan when he took his place in the boat. There she sat, with her eyes and her complexion both much brighter than usual, taking the deepest interest in the curate's progress towards recovery; in the state of Mrs. Pentecost's spirits; in Pedgift Junior (for whom she ostentatiously made room enough to let him sit beside her); in the scenery and the reed-cutter's cottage; in everybody and everything but Allan — whom she would have married with the greatest pleasure five

minutes since. "I'll never forgive him," thought the major's daughter. "To be thinking of that ill-bred wretch when I was thinking of *him* — and to make me all but confess it before I found him out! Thank heaven Mr. Pedgift is in the boat!"

In this frame of mind Miss Neelie applied herself forthwith to the fascination of Pedgift and the discomfiture of Allan. "Oh, Mr. Pedgift, how extremely clever and kind of you to think of showing us that sweet cottage! Lonely, Mr. Armadale? I don't think it's lonely at all; I should like of all things to live there. What would this picnic have been without you, Mr. Pedgift; you can't think how I have enjoyed it since we got into the boat. Cool, Mr. Armadale? What can you possibly mean by saying it's cool; it's the warmest evening we've had this summer. And the music, Mr. Pedgift; how nice it was of you to bring your concertina! I wonder if I could accompany you on the piano? I should so like to try. Oh, yes, Mr. Armadale, no doubt you meant to do something musical too, and I daresay you sing very well when you know the words; but, to tell you the truth, I always did, and always shall hate Moore's Melodies!"

Thus, with merciless dexterity of manipulation, did Miss Milroy work that sharpest female weapon of offence, the tongue — and thus she would have used it for some time longer, if Allan had only shown the necessary jealousy, or if Pedgift had only afforded the necessary encouragement. But adverse fortune had decreed that she should select for her victims two men essentially unassailable under existing circumstances. Allan was too innocent of all knowledge of female subtleties and susceptibilities to understand anything,

except that the charming Neelie was unreasonably out of temper with him without the slightest cause. The wary Pedgift, as became one of the quick-witted youth of the present generation, submitted to female influence, with his eye fixed immovably all the time on his own interests. Many a young man of the past generation, who was no fool, has sacrificed everything for love. Not one young man in ten thousand of the present generation, *except* the fools, has sacrificed a halfpenny. The daughters of Eve still inherit their mother's merits, and commit their mother's faults. But the sons of Adam, in these latter days, are men who would have handed the famous apple back with a bow, and a "Thanks, no; it might get me into a scrape." When Allan — surprised and disappointed — moved away out of Miss Milroy's reach to the forward part of the boat, Pedgift Junior rose and followed him. "You're a very nice girl," thought this shrewd and sensible young man; "but a client's a client — and I am sorry to inform you, Miss, it won't do." He set himself at once to rouse Allan's spirits by diverting his attention to a new subject. There was to be a regatta that autumn on one of the Broads; and his client's opinion as a yachtsman might be valuable to the committee. "Something new I should think to you, sir, in a sailing-match on fresh water?" he said in his most ingratiatory manner. And Allan, instantly interested, answered, "Quite new. Do tell me about it!"

As for the rest of the party, at the other end of the boat, they were in a fair way to confirm Mrs. Pentecost's doubts whether the hilarity of the picnic would last the day out. Poor Neelie's natural feeling of irritation under the disappointment which Allan's

awkwardness had inflicted on her, was now exasperated into silent and settled resentment by her own keen sense of humiliation and defeat. The major had relapsed into his habitually dreamy, absent manner; his mind was turning monotonously with the wheels of his clock. The curate still secluded his indigestion from public view in the innermost recesses of the cabin; and the curate's mother, with a second dose ready at a moment's notice, sat on guard at the door. Women of Mrs. Pentecost's age and character generally enjoy their own bad spirits. "This," sighed the old lady, wagging her head with a smile of sour satisfaction, "is what you call a day's pleasure, is it? Ah, what fools we all were to leave our comfortable homes!"

Meanwhile, the boat floated smoothly along the windings of the watery labyrinth which lay between the two Broads. The view on either side was now limited to nothing but interminable rows of reeds. Not a sound was heard, far or near; not so much as a glimpse of cultivated or inhabited land appeared anywhere. "A trifle dreary hereabouts, Mr. Armadale," said the ever-cheerful Pedgift. "But we are just out of it now. Look ahead, sir! Here we are at Hurle Mere."

The reeds opened back on the right hand and the left, and the boat glided suddenly into the wide circle of a pool. Round the nearer half of the circle, the eternal reeds still fringed the margin of the water. Round the farther half, the land appeared again — here, rolling back from the pool in desolate sand-hills; there, rising above it in a sweep of grassy shore. At one point, the ground was occupied by a plantation; and, at another, by the outbuildings of a lonely old

red-brick house, with a strip of by-road near, that skirted the garden-wall, and ended at the pool. The sun was sinking in the clear heaven, and the water, where the sun's reflection failed to tinge it, was beginning to look black and cold. The solitude that had been soothing, the silence that had felt like an enchantment on the other Broad, in the day's vigorous prime, was a solitude that saddened here — a silence that struck cold, in the stillness and melancholy of the day's decline.

The course of the boat was directed across the Mere to a creek in the grassy shore. One or two of the little flat-bottomed punts peculiar to the Broads lay in the creek; and the reed-cutters to whom the punts belonged, surprised at the appearance of strangers, came out, staring silently, from behind an angle of the old garden-wall. Not another sign of life was visible anywhere. No pony-chaise had been seen by the reed-cutters; no stranger, either man or woman, had approached the shores of Hurle Mere that day.

Young Pedgift took another look at his watch, and addressed himself to Miss Milroy. "You may, or may not, see the governess when you get back to Thorpe-Ambrose," he said; "but, as the time stands now, you won't see her here. You know best, Mr. Armadale," he added, turning to Allan, "whether your friend is to be depended on to keep his appointment?"

"I am certain he is to be depended on," replied Allan, looking about him in unconcealed disappointment at Midwinter's absence.

"Very good," pursued Pedgift Junior. "If we light the fire for our gipsy tea-making on the open ground there, your friend may find us out, sir, by the smoke.

That's the Indian dodge for picking up a lost man on the prairie, Miss Milroy — and it's pretty nearly wild enough (isn't it?) to be a prairie here!"

There are some temptations — principally those of the smaller kind — which it is not in the defensive capacity of female human nature to resist. The temptation to direct the whole force of her influence, as the one young lady of the party, towards the instant overthrow of Allan's arrangement for meeting his friend, was too much for the major's daughter. She turned on the smiling Pedgift with a look which ought to have overwhelmed him. But who ever overwhelmed a solicitor?

"I think it's the most lonely, dreary, hideous place I ever saw in my life!" said Miss Neelie. "If you insist on making tea here, Mr. Pedgift; don't make any for me. No! I shall stop in the boat; and though I am absolutely dying with thirst, I shall touch nothing till we get back again to the other Broad!"

The major opened his lips to remonstrate. To his daughter's infinite delight, Mrs. Pentecost rose from her seat, before he could say a word, and, after surveying the whole landward prospect, and seeing nothing in the shape of a vehicle anywhere, asked indignantly whether they were going all the way back again to the place where they had left the carriages in the middle of the day. On ascertaining that this was, in fact, the arrangement proposed; and that, from the nature of the country, the carriages could not have been ordered round to Hurle Mere without, in the first instance, sending them the whole of the way back to Thorpe-Ambrose, Mrs. Pentecost (speaking in her son's interests) instantly declared that no earthly power

should induce her to be out on the water after dark. "Call me a boat!" cried the old lady, in great agitation. Wherever there's water, there's a night mist, and wherever there's a night mist, my son Samuel catches cold. Don't talk to *me* about your moonlight and your tea-making — you're all mad! Hi! you two men there!" cried Mrs. Pentecost, hailing the silent reed-cutters on shore. "Sixpence a piece for you, if you'll take me and my son back in your boat!"

Before young Pedgift could interfere, Allan himself settled the difficulty this time, with perfect patience and good temper.

"I can't think, Mrs. Pentecost, of your going back in any boat but the boat you have come out in," he said. "There is not the least need (as you and Miss Milroy don't like the place) for anybody to go on shore here but me. I *must* go on shore. My friend Midwinter never broke his promise to me yet; and I can't consent to leave Hurle Mere, as long as there is a chance of his keeping his appointment. But there's not the least reason in the world why I should stand in the way on that account. You have the major and Mr. Pedgift to take care of you; and you can get back to the carriages before dark, if you go at once. I will wait here, and give my friend half-an-hour more — and then I can follow you in one of the reed-cutters' boats."

"That's the most sensible thing, Mr. Armadale, you've said to-day," remarked Mrs. Pentecost, seating herself again in a violent hurry. "Tell them to be quick!" cried the old lady, shaking her fist at the boatmen. "Tell them to be quick!"

Allan gave the necessary directions, and stepped

on shore. The wary Pedgift (sticking fast to his client,) tried to follow.

"We can't leave you here alone, sir," he said, protesting eagerly in a whisper. "Let the major take care of the ladies, and let me keep you company at the Mere."

"No, no!" said Allan, pressing him back. "They're all in low spirits on board. If you want to be of service to me, stop like a good fellow where you are, and do your best to keep the thing going."

He waved his hand, and the men pushed the boat off from the shore. The others all waved their hands in return except the major's daughter, who sat apart from the rest, with her face hidden under her parasol. The tears stood thick in Neelie's eyes. Her last angry feeling against Allan died out, and her heart went back to him penitently, the moment he left the boat. "How good he is to us all!" she thought, "and what a wretch I am!" She got up with every generous impulse in her nature urging her to make atonement to him. She got up, reckless of appearances, and looked after him with eager eyes and flushed cheeks, as he stood alone on the shore. "Don't be long, Mr. Armadale!" she said, with a desperate disregard of what the rest of the company thought of her.

The boat was already far out in the water, and with all Neelie's resolution, the words were spoken in a faint little voice, which failed to reach Allan's ears. The one sound he heard, as the boat gained the opposite extremity of the Mere, and disappeared slowly among the reeds, was the sound of the concertina. The indefatigable Pedgift was keeping things going —

evidently under the auspices of Mrs. Pentecost — by performing a sacred melody.

Left by himself, Allan lit a cigar, and took a turn backwards and forwards on the shore. "She might have said a word to me at parting!" he thought. "I've done everything for the best; I've as good as told her how fond of her I am, and this is the way she treats me." He stopped, and stood looking absently at the sinking sun, and the fast-darkening waters of the Mere. Some inscrutable influence in the scene forced its way stealthily into his mind, and diverted his thoughts from Miss Milroy to his absent friend. He started, and looked about him.

The reed-cutters had gone back to their retreat behind the angle of the wall, not a living creature was visible, not a sound rose anywhere along the dreary shore. Even Allan's spirits began to get depressed. It was nearly an hour after the time when Midwinter had promised to be at Hurle Mere. He had himself arranged to walk to the pool (with a stable-boy from Thorpe-Ambrose, as his guide), by lanes and footpaths which shortened the distance by the road. The boy knew the country well, and Midwinter was habitually punctual at all his appointments. Had anything gone wrong at Thorpe-Ambrose? Had some accident happened on the way? Determined to remain no longer doubting and idling by himself, Allan made up his mind to walk inland from the Mere, on the chance of meeting his friend. He went round at once to the angle in the wall, and asked one of the reed-cutters to show him the footpath to Thorpe-Ambrose.

The man led him away from the road, and pointed to a barely-perceptible break in the outer trees of the

plantation. After pausing for one more useless look around him, Allan turned his back on the Mere, and made for the trees.

For a few paces, the path ran straight through the plantation. Thence, it took a sudden turn — and the water and the open country became both lost to view. Allan steadily followed the grassy track before him, seeing nothing and hearing nothing, until he came to another winding of the path. Turning in the new direction he saw dimly a human figure sitting alone at the foot of one of the trees. Two steps nearer were enough to make the figure familiar to him. "Midwinter!" he exclaimed, in astonishment. "This is not the place where I was to meet you! What are you waiting for here?"

Midwinter rose, without answering. The evening dimness among the trees, which obscured his face, made his silence doubly perplexing.

Allan went on eagerly questioning him. "Did you come here by yourself?" he asked. "I thought the boy was to guide you?"

This time Midwinter answered. "When we got as far as these trees," he said, "I sent the boy back. He told me I was close to the place, and couldn't miss it."

"What made you stop here, when he left you?" reiterated Allan. "Why didn't you walk on?"

"Don't despise me," answered the other, "I hadn't the courage!"

"Not the courage?" repeated Allan. He paused a moment. "Oh, I know!" he resumed, putting his hand gaily on Midwinter's shoulder. "You're still shy of the Milroys. What nonsense, when I told you myself that your peace was made at the cottage!"

"I wasn't thinking, Allan, of your friends at the cottage. The truth is, I'm hardly myself to-day. I am ill and unnerved; trifles startle me." He stopped, and shrunk away, under the anxious scrutiny of Allan's eyes. "If you *will* have it," he burst out abruptly, "the horror of that night on board the Wreck has got me again; there's a dreadful oppression on my head; there's a dreadful sinking at my heart — I am afraid of something happening to us, if we don't part before the day is out. I can't break my promise to you; for God's sake, release me from it, and let me go back?"

Remonstrance, to any one who knew Midwinter, was plainly useless at that moment. Allan humoured him. "Come out of this dark airless place," he said; "and we'll talk about it. The water and the open sky are within a stone's throw of us. I hate a wood in the evening — it even gives *me* the horrors. You have been working too hard over the steward's books. Come and breathe freely in the blessed open air."

Midwinter stopped, considered for a moment, and suddenly submitted.

"You're right," he said, "and I'm wrong, as usual. I'm wasting time and distressing you to no purpose. What folly to ask you to let me go back! Suppose you had said yes?"

"Well?" asked Allan.

"Well," repeated Midwinter, "something would have happened at the first step to stop me — that's all. Come on."

They walked together in silence on the way to the Mere.

At the last turn in the path Allan's cigar went out. While he stopped to light it again, Midwinter

walked on before him, and was the first to come in sight of the open ground.

Allan had just kindled the match, when, to his surprise, his friend came back to him round the turn in the path. There was light enough to show objects more clearly in this part of the plantation. The match, as Midwinter faced him, dropped on the instant from Allan's hand.

"Good God!" he cried, starting back, "you look as you looked on board the Wreck!"

Midwinter held up his hand for silence. He spoke with his wild eyes riveted on Allan's face, with his white lips close at Allan's ear.

"You remember how I *looked*," he answered in a whisper. "Do you remember what I *said*, when you and the doctor were talking of the Dream?"

"I have forgotten the Dream," said Allan.

As he made that answer, Midwinter took his hand, and led him round the last turn in the path.

"Do you remember it now?" he asked, and pointed to the Mere.

The sun was sinking in the cloudless westward heaven. The waters of the Mere lay beneath, tinged red by the dying light. The open country stretched away, darkening drearily already on the right hand and the left. And on the near margin of the pool, where all had been solitude before, there now stood, fronting the sunset, the figure of a woman.

The two Armadales stood together in silence, and looked at the lonely figure and the dreary view.

Midwinter was the first to speak.

"Your own eyes have seen it," he said. "Now look at your own words."

He opened the narrative of the Dream, and held it under Allan's eyes. His finger pointed to the lines which recorded the first Vision; his voice sinking lower and lower, repeated the words: —

"The sense came to me of being left alone in the darkness.

"I waited.

"The darkness opened and showed me the vision — as in a picture — of a broad, lonely pool, surrounded by open ground. Above the farther margin of the pool I saw the cloudless western sky, red with the light of sunset.

"On the near margin of the pool there stood the Shadow of a Woman."

He ceased, and let the hand which held the manuscript drop to his side. The other hand pointed to the lonely figure, standing with its back turned on them, fronting the setting sun.

"There," he said, "stands the living Woman, in the Shadow's place! There speaks the first of the dream-warnings to you and to me! Let the future time find us still together — and the second figure that stands in the Shadow's place will be Mine."

Even Allan was silenced by the terrible certainty of conviction with which he spoke.

In the pause that followed, the figure at the pool moved, and walked slowly away round the margin of the shore. Allan stepped out beyond the last of the trees, and gained a wider view of the open ground. The first object that met his eyes was the pony-chaise from Thorpe-Ambrose.

He turned back to Midwinter with a laugh of relief. "What nonsense have you been talking!" he said. "And what nonsense have I been listening to! It's the governess at last."

Midwinter made no reply. Allan took him by the arm, and tried to lead him on. He released himself suddenly, and seized Allan with both hands — holding him back from the figure at the pool, as he had held him back from the cabin-door on the deck of the timber-ship. Once again, the effort was in vain. Once again, Allan broke away as easily as he had broken away in the past time.

"One of us must speak to her," he said. "And if you won't, I will."

He had only advanced a few steps towards the Mere, when he heard, or thought he heard, a voice faintly calling after him, once and once only, the word Farewell. He stopped, with a feeling of uneasy surprise, and looked round.

"Was that you, Midwinter?" he asked.

There was no answer. After hesitating a moment more, Allan returned to the plantation. Midwinter was gone.

He looked back at the pool; doubtful in the new emergency, what to do next. The lonely figure had altered its course in the interval: it had turned and was advancing towards the trees. Allan had been evidently either heard or seen. It was impossible to leave a woman unbefriended, in that helpless position and in that solitary place. For the second time Allan went out from the trees to meet her.

As he came within sight of her face, he stopped in ungovernable astonishment. The sudden revelation

of her beauty, as she smiled and looked at him, inquiringly, suspended the movement in his limbs and the words on his lips. A vague doubt beset him whether it was the governess, after all.

He roused himself; and, advancing a few paces, mentioned his name. "May I ask," he added, "if I have the pleasure —?"

The lady met him easily and gracefully half way.

"Major Milroy's governess," she said. "Miss Gwilt."

CHAPTER X.

The Housemaid's Face.

All was quiet at Thorpe-Ambrose. The hall was solitary, the rooms were dark. The servants, waiting for the supper-hour in the garden at the back of the house, looked up at the clear heaven and the rising moon, and agreed that there was little prospect of the return of the picnic party until later in the night. The general opinion, led by the high authority of the cook, predicted that they might all sit down to supper without the least fear of being disturbed by the bell. Having arrived at this conclusion, the servants assembled round the table; and exactly at the moment when they sat down, the bell rang.

The footman, wondering, went upstairs to open the door, and found to his astonishment Midwinter waiting alone on the threshold, and looking (in the servant's opinion) miserably ill. He asked for a light, and saying he wanted nothing else, withdrew at once to his room. The footman went back to his fellow-servants,

and reported that something had certainly happened to his master's friend.

On entering his room, Midwinter closed the door, and hurriedly filled a bag with the necessaries for travelling. This done, he took from a locked drawer, and placed in the breast-pocket of his coat, some little presents which Allan had given to him — a cigar-case, a purse, and a set of studs in plain gold. Having possessed himself of these memorials, he snatched up the bag, and laid his hand on the door. There, for the first time, he paused. There, the headlong haste of all his actions thus far suddenly ceased, and the hard despair in his face began to soften: he waited, with the door in his hand.

Up to that moment he had been conscious of but one motive that animated him, but one purpose that he was resolute to achieve. "For Allan's sake!" he had said to himself, when he looked back towards the fatal landscape and saw his friend leaving him to meet the woman at the pool. "For Allan's sake!" he had said again, when he crossed the open country beyond the wood, and saw afar, in the grey twilight, the long line of embankment and the distant glimmer of the railway lamps beckoning him away already to the iron road.

It was only when he now paused before he closed the door behind him — it was only when his own impetuous rapidity of action came for the first time to a check — that the nobler nature of the man rose in protest against the superstitious despair which was hurrying him from all that he held dear. His conviction of the terrible necessity of leaving Allan for Allan's good, had not been shaken for an instant since

he had seen the first vision of the Dream realized on the shores of the Mere. But now, for the first time, his own heart rose against him in unanswerable rebuke. "Go, if you must and will! but remember the time when you were ill, and he sat by your bedside; friendless, and he opened his heart to you — and write, if you fear to speak; write and ask him to forgive you, before you leave him for ever!"

The half-opened door closed again softly. Midwinter sat down at the writing-table and took up the pen.

He tried again and again, and yet again to write the farewell words; he tried, till the floor all round him was littered with torn sheets of paper. Turn from them which way he would, the old times still came back and faced him reproachfully. The spacious bedchamber in which he sat, narrowed, in spite of him, to the sick usher's garret at the west-country inn. The kind hand that had once patted him on the shoulder touched him again; the kind voice that had cheered him, spoke unchangeably in the old friendly tones. He flung his arms on the table, and dropped his head on them in tearless despair. The parting words that his tongue was powerless to utter, his pen was powerless to write. Mercilessly in earnest, his superstition pointed to him to go while the time was his own. Mercilessly in earnest, his love for Allan held him back till the farewell plea for pardon and pity was written.

He rose with a sudden resolution, and rang for the servant. "When Mr. Armadale returns," he said, "ask him to excuse my coming down-stairs, and say that I am trying to get to sleep." He locked the door and put out the light, and sat down alone in the darkness.

"The night will keep us apart," he said; "and time may help me to write. I may go in the early morning; I may go while —" The thought died in him uncompleted; and the sharp agony of the struggle forced to his lips the first cry of suffering that had escaped him yet.

He waited in the darkness.

As the time stole on, his senses remained mechanically awake, but his mind began to sink slowly under the heavy strain that had now been laid on it for some hours past. A dull vacancy possessed him; he made no attempt to kindle the light and write once more. He never started; he never moved to the open window, when the first sound of approaching wheels broke in on the silence of the night. He heard the carriages draw up at the door; he heard the horses champing their bits; he heard the voices of Allan and young Pedgift on the steps — and still he sat quiet in the darkness, and still no interest was aroused in him by the sounds that reached his ear from outside.

The voices remained audible after the carriages had been driven away; the two young men were evidently lingering on the steps before they took leave of each other. Every word they said reached Midwinter through the open window. Their one subject of conversation was the new governess. Allan's voice was loud in her praise. He had never passed such an hour of delight in his life as the hour he had spent with Miss Gwilt in the boat, on the way from Hurle Mere to the picnic party waiting at the other Broad. Agreeing, on his side, with all that his client said in praise of the charming stranger, young Pedgift appeared to treat the subject, when it fell into his hands from a different point of

view. Miss Gwilt's attractions had not so entirely absorbed his attention as to prevent him from noticing the impression which the new governess had produced on her employer and her pupil.

"There's a screw loose somewhere, sir, in Major Milroy's family," said the voice of young Pedgift. "Did you notice how the Major and his daughter looked when Miss Gwilt made her excuses for being late at the Mere? You don't remember? Do you remember what Miss Gwilt said?"

"Something about Mrs. Milroy, wasn't it?" Allan rejoined.

Young Pedgift's voice dropped mysteriously a note lower.

"Miss Gwilt reached the cottage this afternoon, sir, at the time when I told you she would reach it, and she would have joined us at the time I told you she would come, but for Mrs. Milroy. Mrs. Milroy sent for her upstairs as soon as she entered the house, and kept her upstairs a good half hour and more. That was Miss Gwilt's excuse, Mr. Armadale, for being late at the Mere."

"Well, and what then?"

"You seem to forget, sir, what the whole neighbourhood has heard about Mrs. Milroy ever since the major first settled among us. We have all been told, on the doctor's own authority, that she is too great a sufferer to see strangers. Isn't it a little odd that she should have suddenly turned out well enough to see Miss Gwilt (in her husband's absence) the moment Miss Gwilt entered the house?"

"Not a bit of it! Of course she was anxious to make aquaintance with her daughter's governess."

"Likely enough, Mr. Armadale. But the major and Miss Neelie don't see it in that light, at any rate. I had my eye on them both when the governess told them that Mrs. Milroy had sent for her. If ever I saw a girl look thoroughly frightened, Miss Milroy was that girl; and (if I may be allowed, in the strictest confidence, to libel a gallant soldier) I should say that the major himself was much in the same condition. Take my word for it, sir, there's something wrong upstairs in that pretty cottage of yours; and Miss Gwilt is mixed up in it already."

There was a minute of silence. When the voices were next heard by Midwinter, they were farther away from the house — Allan was probably accompanying young Pedgift a few steps on his way back.

After a while, Allan's voice was audible once more under the portico, making inquiries after his friend; answered by the servant's voice giving Midwinter's message. This brief interruption over, the silence was not broken again till the time came for shutting up the house. The servants' footsteps passing to and fro, the clang of closing doors, the barking of a disturbed dog in the stable-yard — these sounds warned Midwinter that it was getting late. He rose mechanically to kindle a light. But his head was giddy, his hand trembled — he laid aside the match-box, and returned to his chair. The conversation between Allan and young Pedgift had ceased to occupy his attention the instant he ceased to hear it; and now again, the sense that the precious time was failing him became a lost sense, as soon as the house-noises which had awakened it had passed away. His energies of body and mind were both alike

worn out; he waited with a stolid resignation for the trouble that was to come to him with the coming day.

An interval passed, and the silence was once more disturbed by voices outside; the voices of a man and a woman this time. The first few words exchanged between them indicated plainly enough a meeting of the clandestine kind; and revealed the man as one of the servants at Thorpe-Ambrose, and the woman as one of the servants at the cottage.

Here again, after the first greetings were over, the subject of the new governess became the all-absorbing subject of conversation:

The major's servant was brimful of forebodings (inspired solely by Miss Gwilt's good looks), which she poured out irrepressibly on her "sweetheart," try as he might to divert her to other topics. Sooner or later, let him mark her words, there would be an awful "upset" at the cottage. Her master, it might be mentioned in confidence, led a dreadful life with her mistress. The major was the best of men; he hadn't a thought in his heart beyond his daughter and his everlasting clock. But only let a nice-looking woman come near the place, and Mrs. Milroy was jealous of her — raging jealous, like a woman possessed, on that miserable sick-bed of hers. If Miss Gwilt (who was certainly good-looking, in spite of her hideous hair) didn't blow the fire into a flame before many days more were over their heads, the mistress was the mistress no longer but somebody else. Whatever happened, the fault, this time, would lie at the door of the major's mother. The old lady and the mistress had had a dreadful quarrel two years since; and the old lady had gone away in a fury, telling her son, before all the servants, that if he

had a spark of spirit in him, he would never submit to his wife's temper as he did. It would be too much perhaps to accuse the major's mother of purposely picking out a handsome governess to spite the major's wife. But it might be safely said that the old lady was the last person in the world to humour the mistress's jealousy, by declining to engage a capable and respectable governess for her granddaughter, because that governess happened to be blessed with good looks. How it was all to end (except that it was certain to end badly) no human creature could say. Things were looking as black already as things well could. Miss Neelie was crying, after the day's pleasure (which was one bad sign); the mistress had found fault with nobody (which was another); the master had wished her good-night through the door (which was a third); and the governess had locked herself up in her room (which was the worst sign of all, for it looked as if she distrusted the servants). Thus the stream of the woman's gossip ran on, and thus it reached Midwinter's ears through the window, till the clock in the stable-yard struck, and stopped the talking. When the last vibrations of the bell had died away, the voices were not audible again, and the silence was broken no more.

Another interval passed, and Midwinter made a new effort to rouse himself. This time he kindled the light without hesitation, and took the pen in hand.

He wrote at the first trial with a sudden facility of expression, which, surprising him as he went on, ended in rousing in him some vague suspicion of himself. He left the table, and bathed his head and face in water, and came back to read what he had written. The language was barely intelligible — sentences were

left unfinished; words were misplaced one for the other — every line recorded the protest of the weary brain against the merciless will that had forced it into action. Midwinter tore up the sheet of paper as he had torn up the other sheets before it — and sinking under the struggle at last, laid his weary head on the pillow. Almost on the instant, exhaustion overcame him; and before he could put the light out he fell asleep.

He was roused by a noise at the door. The sunlight was pouring into the room; the candle had burnt down into the socket; and the servant was waiting outside with a letter which had come for him by the morning's post.

"I ventured to disturb you, sir," said the man, when Midwinter opened the door, "because the letter is marked 'Immediate,' and I didn't know but it might be of some consequence."

Midwinter thanked him, and looked at the letter. It *was* of some consequence — the handwriting was Mr. Brock's.

He paused to collect his faculties. The torn sheets of paper on the floor recalled to him in a moment the position in which he stood. He locked the door again in the fear that Allan might rise earlier than usual and come in to make inquiries. Then — feeling strangely little interest in anything that the rector could write to him now — he opened Mr. Brock's letter, and read these lines: —

"Tuesday.

"My dear Midwinter, — It is sometimes best to tell bad news plainly, in few words. Let me tell mine at once, in one sentence. My precautions have all been defeated: the woman has escaped me.

"This misfortune — for it is nothing less — hap-

pened yesterday (Monday). Between eleven and twelve in the forenoon of that day, the business which originally brought me to London obliged me to go to Doctors' Commons, and to leave my servant Robert to watch the house opposite our lodging until my return. About an hour and a half after my departure he observed an empty cab drawn up at the door of the house. Boxes and bags made their appearance first; they were followed by the woman herself, in the dress I had first seen her in. Having previously secured a cab, Robert traced her to the terminus of the North-Western Railway — saw her pass through the ticket-office — kept her in view till she reached the platform — and there, in the crowd and confusion caused by the starting of a large mixed train, lost her. I must do him the justice to say that he at once took the right course in this emergency. Instead of wasting time in searching for her on the platform, he looked along the line of carriages; and he positively declares that he failed to see her in any one of them. He admits, at the same time, that his search (conducted between two o'clock, when he lost sight of her, and ten minutes past, when the train started) was, in the confusion of the moment, necessarily an imperfect one. But this latter circumstance, in my opinion, matters little. I as firmly disbelieve in the woman's actual departure by that train as if I had searched every one of the carriages myself; and you, I have no doubt, will entirely agree with me.

"You now know how the disaster happened. Let us not waste time and words in lamenting it. The evil is done — and you and I together must find the way to remedy it.

"What I have accomplished already, on my side,

may be told in two words. Any hesitation I might have previously felt at trusting this delicate business in strangers' hands, was at an end the moment I heard Robert's news. I went back at once to the city, and placed the whole matter confidentially before my lawyers. The conference was a long one; and when I left the office it was past the post-hour, or I should have written to you on Monday instead of writing to-day. My interview with the lawyers was not very encouraging. They warn me plainly that serious difficulties stand in the way of our recovering the lost trace. But they have promised to do their best; and we have decided on the course to be taken — excepting one point on which we totally differ. I must tell you what this difference is; for while business keeps me away from Thorpe-Ambrose, you are the only person whom I can trust to put my convictions to the test.

"The lawyers are of opinion, then, that the woman has been aware from the first that I was watching her; that there is, consequently, no present hope of her being rash enough to appear personally at Thorpe-Ambrose; that any mischief she may have it in contemplation to do, will be done in the first instance by deputy; and that the only wise course for Allan's friends and guardians to take, is to wait passively till events enlighten them. My own idea is diametrically opposed to this. After what has happened at the railway, I cannot deny that the woman must have discovered that I was watching her. But she has no reason to suppose that she has not succeeded in deceiving me; and I firmly believe she is bold enough to take us by surprise, and to win, or force her way into Allan's confidence before we are prepared to prevent her.

"You and you only (while I am detained in London) can decide whether I am right or wrong — and you can do it in this way. Ascertain at once whether any woman who is a stranger in the neighbourhood has appeared since Monday last, at, or near, Thorpe-Ambrose. If any such person has been observed (and nobody escapes observation in the country), take the first opportunity you can get of seeing her, and ask yourself if her face does, or does not, answer certain plain questions which I am now about to write down for you. You may depend on my accuracy. I saw the woman unveiled on more than one occasion — and the last time through an excellent glass.

"1. Is her hair light brown, and (apparently) not very plentiful? 2. Is her forehead high, narrow, and sloping backward from the brow? 3. Are her eyebrows very faintly marked, and are her eyes small, and nearer dark than light — either grey or hazel (I have not seen her close enough to be certain which)? 4. Is her nose aquiline? 5. Are her lips thin, and is the upper lip long? 6. Does her complexion look like an originally fair complexion, which has deteriorated into a dull, sickly paleness. 7. (and lastly). Has she a retreating chin, and is there, on the left side of it, a mark of some kind — a mole or a scar, I can't say which?

"I add nothing about her expression, for you may see her under circumstances which may partially alter it as seen by me. Test her by her features, which no circumstances can change. If there is a stranger in the neighbourhood, and if her face answers my seven questions — *you have found the woman!* Go instantly, in that case, to the nearest lawyer, and pledge my

name and credit for whatever expenses may be incurred in keeping her under inspection night and day. Having done this, take the speediest means of communicating with me; and whether my business is finished or not, I will start for Norfolk by the first train.

"Always your friend,

"DECIMUS BROCK."

Hardened by the fatalist conviction that now possessed him, Midwinter read the rector's confession of defeat from the first line to the last, without the slightest betrayal either of interest or surprise. The one part of the letter at which he looked back was the closing part of it. "I owe much to Mr. Brock's kindness," he thought; "and I shall never see Mr. Brock again. It is useless and hopeless — but he asks me to do it, and it shall be done. A moment's look at her will be enough — a moment's look at her with his letter in my hand — and a line to tell him that the woman is here!"

Again he stood hesitating at the half-opened door; again, the cruel necessity of writing his farewell to Allan stopped him, and stared him in the face.

He looked aside doubtingly at the rector's letter. "I will write the two together," he said. "One may help the other." His face flushed deep as the words escaped him. He was conscious of doing, what he had not done yet — of voluntarily putting off the evil hour; of making Mr. Brock the pretext for gaining the last respite left, the respite of time.

The only sound that reached him through the open door was the sound of Allan stirring noisily in the

next room. He stepped at once into the empty corridor; and, meeting no one on the stairs, made his way out of the house. The dread that his resolution to leave Allan might fail him, if he saw Allan again, was as vividly present to his mind in the morning as it had been all through the night. He drew a deep breath of relief as he descended the house steps — relief at having escaped the friendly greeting of the morning from the one human creature whom he loved!

He entered the shrubbery with Mr. Brock's letter in his hand, and took the nearest way that led to the major's cottage. Not the slightest recollection was in his mind of the talk which had found its way to his ears during the night. His one reason for determining to see the woman, was the reason which the rector had put in his mind. The one remembrance that now guided him to the place in which she lived, was the remembrance of Allan's exclamation when he first identified the governess with the figure at the pool.

Arrived at the gate of the cottage, he stopped. The thought struck him that he might defeat his own object if he looked at the rector's questions in the woman's presence. Her supicions would be probably roused, in the first instance, by his asking to see her (as he had determined to ask, with or without an excuse); and the appearance of the letter in his hand might confirm them. She might defeat him by instantly leaving the room. Determined to fix the description in his mind first, and then to confront her, he opened the letter; and, turning away slowly by the side of the house, read the seven questions which he felt absolutely assured beforehand the woman's face would answer.

In the morning quiet of the park, slight noises

travelled far. A slight noise disturbed Midwinter over the letter.

He looked up and found himself on the brink of a broad grassy trench, having the park on one side and the high laurel hedge of an enclosure on the other. The enclosure evidently surrounded the back garden of the cottage; and the trench was intended to protect it from being damaged by the cattle grazing in the park.

Listening carefully as the slight sound which had disturbed him grew fainter, he recognized in it the rustling of women's dresses. A few paces ahead, the trench was crossed by a bridge (closed by a wicket-gate) which connected the garden with the park. He passed through the gate, crossed the bridge, and, opening a door at the other end, found himself in a summer-house, thickly covered with creepers, and commanding a full view of the garden from end to end.

He looked, and saw the figures of two ladies walking slowly away from him towards the cottage. The shorter of the two failed to occupy his attention for an instant — he never stopped to think whether she was, or was not, the major's daughter. His eyes were riveted on the other figure; the figure that moved over the garden walk with the long lightly-falling dress, and the easy seductive grace. There, presented exactly as he had seen her once already — there, with her back again turned on him, was the Woman at the pool!

There was a chance that they might take another turn in the garden — a turn back towards the summer-house. On that chance Midwinter waited. No consciousness of the intrusion that he was committing had

stopped him at the door of the summer-house; and no consciousness of it troubled him even now. Every finer sensibility in his nature, sinking under the cruel laceration of the past night, had ceased to feel. The dogged resolution to do what he had come to do, was the one animating influence left alive in him. He acted, he even looked, as the most stolid man living might have acted and looked in his place. He was self-possessed enough, in the interval of expectation, before governess and pupil reached the end of the walk, to open Mr. Brock's letter, and to fortify his memory by a last look at the paragraph which described her face.

He was still absorbed over the description, when he heard the smooth rustle of the dresses travelling towards him again. Standing in the shadow of the summer-house, he waited while she lessened the distance between them. With her written portrait vividly impressed on his mind, and with the clear light of the morning to help him, his eyes questioned her as she came on; and these were the answers that her face gave him back.

The hair in the rector's description was light brown and not plentiful. This woman's hair, superbly luxuriant in its growth, was of the one unpardonably remarkable shade of colour which the prejudice of the Northern nations never entirely forgives — it was *red!* The forehead in the rector's description was high, narrow, and sloping backward from the brow; the eyebrows were faintly marked; and the eyes small, and in colour either grey or hazel. This woman's forehead was low, upright, and broad towards the temples; her eyebrows, at once strongly and delicately marked, were a shade darker than her hair; her eyes, large, bright, and well-

opened, were of that purely blue colour, without a tinge in it of grey or green, so often presented to our admiration in pictures and books, so rarely met with in the living face. The nose in the rector's description was aquiline. The line of this woman's nose bent neither outward nor inward: it was the straight delicately-moulded nose (with the short upper lip beneath) of the ancient statues and busts. The lips in the rector's description were thin, and the upper lip long; the complexion was of a dull sickly paleness; the chin retreating, and the mark of a mole or a scar on the left side of it. This woman's lips were full, rich, and sensual. Her complexion was the lovely complexion which accompanies such hair as hers — so delicately bright in its rosier tints, so warmly and softly white in its gentler gradations of colour on the forehead and the neck. Her chin, round and dimpled, was pure of the slightest blemish in every part of it, and perfectly in line with her forehead to the end. Nearer and nearer, and fairer and fairer she came, in the glow of the morning light — the most startling, the most unanswerable contradiction that eye could see, or mind conceive, to the description in the rector's letter.

Both governess and pupil were close to the summer-house before they looked that way, and noticed Midwinter standing inside. The governess saw him first.

"A friend of yours, Miss Milroy?" she asked quietly, without starting, or betraying any sign of surprise.

Neelie recognized him instantly. Prejudiced against Midwinter by his conduct when his friend had introduced him at the cottage, she now fairly detested him as the unlucky first cause of her misunderstanding

with Allan at the picnic. Her face flushed, and she drew back from the summer-house with an expression of merciless surprise.

"He is a friend of Mr. Armadale's," she replied sharply. "I don't know what he wants, or why he is here."

"A friend of Mr. Armadale's!" The governess's face lit up with a suddenly-roused interest as she repeated the words. She returned Midwinter's look, still steadily fixed on her, with equal steadiness on her side.

"For my part," pursued Neelie, resenting Midwinter's insensibility to her presence on the scene, "I think it a great liberty to treat papa's garden as if it was the open park!"

The governess turned round, and gently interposed.

"My dear Miss Milroy," she remonstrated, "there are certain distinctions to be observed. This gentleman is a friend of Mr. Armadale's. You could hardly express yourself more strongly, if he was a perfect stranger."

"I express my opinion," retorted Neelie, chafing under the satirically indulgent tone in which the governess addressed her. "It's a matter of taste, Miss Gwilt; and tastes differ." She turned away petulantly, and walked back by herself to the cottage.

"She is very young," said Miss Gwilt, appealing with a smile to Midwinter's forbearance; "and, as you must see for yourself, sir, she is a spoilt child." She paused — showed, for an instant only, ner surprise at Midwinter's strange silence and strange persistency in keeping his eyes still fixed on her — then set her-

self, with a charming grace and readiness, to help him out of the false position in which he stood. "As you have extended your walk thus far," she resumed, "perhaps you will kindly favour me, on your return, by taking a message to your friend? Mr. Armadale has been so good as to invite me to see the Thorpe-Ambrose gardens this morning. Will you say that Major Milroy permits me to accept the invitation (in company with Miss Milroy) between ten and eleven o'clock?" For a moment her eyes rested, with a renewed look of interest, on Midwinter's face. She waited, still in vain, for an answering word from him — smiled, as if his extraordinary silence amused rather than angered her — and followed her pupil back to the cottage.

It was only when the last trace of her had disappeared that Midwinter roused himself, and attempted to realize the position in which he stood. The revelation of her beauty was in no respect answerable for the breathless astonishment which had held him spell-bound up to this moment. The one clear impression she had produced on him thus far, began and ended with his discovery of the astounding contradiction that her face offered, in one feature after another, to the description in Mr. Brock's letter. All beyond this was vague and misty — a dim consciousness of a tall, elegant woman, and of kind words, modestly and gracefully spoken to him, and nothing more.

He advanced a few steps into the garden, without knowing why — stopped, glancing hither and thither like a man lost — recognized the summer-house by an effort, as if years had elapsed since he had seen it

— and made his way out again, at last, into the park. Even here, he wandered first in one direction, then in another. His mind was still reeling under the shock that had fallen on it; his perceptions were all confused. Something kept him mechanically in action, walking eagerly without a motive, walking he knew not where.

A far less sensitively organized man might have been overwhelmed, as he was overwhelmed now, by the immense, the instantaneous revulsion of feeling which the event of the last few minutes had wrought in his mind.

At the memorable instant when he had opened the door of the summer-house, no confusing influence troubled his faculties. In all that related to his position towards his friend, he had reached an absolutely definite conclusion, by an absolutely definite process of thought. The whole strength of the motive which had driven him into the resolution to part from Allan, rooted itself in the belief that he had seen at Hurle Mere the fatal fulfilment of the first Vision of the Dream. And this belief, in its turn, rested, necessarily, and the conviction that the woman who was the one survivor of the tragedy in Madeira, must be also inevitably the woman whom he had seen standing in the Shadow's place at the pool. Firm in that persuasion, he had himself compared the object of his distrust and of the rector's distrust with the description written by the rector himself — a description, carefully minute, by a man entirely trustworthy — and his own eyes had informed him that the woman whom he had seen at the Mere, and the woman whom Mr. Brock had identified in London, were not one, but Two. In the place of the Dream-Shadow, there had stood, on the evidence

of the rector's letter, not the instrument of the Fatality — but a stranger!

No such doubts as might have troubled a less superstitious man, were started in *his* mind by the discovery that had now opened on him.

It never occurred to him to ask himself, whether a stranger might not be the appointed instrument of the Fatality, now when the letter had persuaded him that a stranger had been revealed as the figure in the dream-landscape. No such idea entered, or could enter, his mind. The one woman, whom *his* superstition dreaded, was the woman who had entwined herself with the lives of the two Armadales in the first generation, and with the fortunes of the two Armadales in the second — who was at once the marked object of his father's death-bed warning, and the first cause of the family calamities which had opened Allan's way to the Thorpe-Ambrose estate — the woman, in a word, whom he would have known instinctively, but for Mr. Brock's letter, to be the woman whom he had now actually seen.

Looking at events as they had just happened, under the influence of the misapprehension into which the rector had innocently misled him, his mind saw and seized its new conclusion instantaneously; acting precisely as it had acted in the past time of his interview with Mr. Brock at the Isle of Man.

Exactly as he had once declared it to be an all-sufficient refutation of the idea of the Fatality; that he had never met with the timber-ship in any of his voyages at sea — so he now seized on the similarly-derived conclusion, that the whole claim of the Dream to a supernatural origin stood self-refuted by the dis-

closure of a stranger in the Shadow's place. Once started from this point — once encouraged to let his love for Allan influence him undividedly again — his mind hurried along the whole resulting chain of thought at lightning speed. If the Dream was proved to be no longer a warning from the other world, it followed, inevitably, that accident and not fate had led the way to the night on the Wreck, and that all the events which had happened since Allan and he had parted from Mr. Brock, were events in themselves harmless, which his superstition had distorted from their proper shape. In less than a moment, his mobile imagination had taken him back to the morning at Castletown when he had revealed to the rector the secret of his name; when he had declared to the rector, with his father's letter before his eyes, the better faith that was in him. Now once more, he felt his heart holding firmly by the bond of brotherhood between Allan and himself; now once more he could say with the eager sincerity of the old time, "If the thought of leaving him breaks my heart, the thought of leaving him is wrong!" As that nobler conviction possessed itself again of his mind — quieting the tumult, clearing the confusion within him — the house at Thorpe-Ambrose, with Allan on the steps, waiting and looking for him, opened on his eyes through the trees. A sense of illimitable relief lifted his eager spirit high above the cares, and doubts, and fears that had oppressed it so long; and showed him once more the better and brighter future of his early dreams. His eyes filled with tears, and he pressed the rector's letter, in his wild passionate way to his lips, as he looked at Allan through the vista of the trees. "But for this morsel of paper," he thought,

"my life might have been one long sorrow to me, and my father's crime might have parted us for ever!"

Such was the result of the stratagem which had shown the housemaid's face to Mr. Brock as the face of Miss Gwilt. And so — by shaking Midwinter's trust in his own superstition, in the one case in which that superstition pointed to the truth — did Mother Oldershaw's cunning triumph over difficulties and dangers, which had never been contemplated by Mother Oldershaw herself.

CHAPTER XI.

Miss Gwilt among the Quicksands.

1. — *From the Reverend Decimus Brock to Ozias Midwinter.*

"Thursday.

"My dear Midwinter, — No words can tell what a relief it was to me to get your letter this morning, and what a happiness I honestly feel in having been, thus far, proved to be in the wrong. The precautions you have taken in case the woman should still confirm my apprehensions by venturing herself at Thorpe-Ambrose, seem to me to be all that can be desired. You are no doubt sure to hear of her from one or other of the people in the lawyer's office, whom you have asked to inform you of the appearance of a stranger in the town.

"I am the more pleased at finding how entirely I can trust you in this matter — for I am likely to be obliged to leave Allan's interests longer than I sup-

posed solely in your hands. My visit to Thorpe-Ambrose must, I regret to say, be deferred for two months. The only one of my brother-clergymen in London, who is able to take my duty for me, cannot make it convenient to remove with his family to Somersetshire before that time. I have no alternative but to finish my business here, and be back at my rectory on Saturday next. If anything happens, you will of course instantly communicate with me — and, in that case, be the inconvenience what it may, I must leave home for Thorpe-Ambrose. If, on the other hand, all goes more smoothly than my own obstinate apprehensions will allow me to suppose, then Allan (to whom I have written) must not expect to see me till this day two months.

"No result has, up to this time, rewarded our exertions to recover the trace lost at the railway. I will keep my letter open, however, until post-time, in case the next few hours bring any news.

"Always truly yours,

"Decimus Brock."

"P.S. — I have just heard from the lawyers. They have found out the name the woman passed by in London. If this discovery (not a very important one, I am afraid,) suggests any new course of proceeding to you, pray act on it at once. The name is — Miss Gwilt."

2. — *From Miss Gwilt to Mrs. Oldershaw.*

"The Cottage, Thorpe-Ambrose,
"Saturday, June 28th.

"If you will promise not to be alarmed, Mamma Oldershaw, I will begin this letter in a very odd way,

by copying a page of a letter written by somebody else. You have an excellent memory, and you may not have forgotten that I received a note from Major Milroy's mother (after she had engaged me as governess), on Monday last. It was dated and signed; and here it is, as far as the first page: — 'June 23rd, 1851. Dear Madam, — Pray excuse my troubling you, before you go to Thorpe-Ambrose, with a word more about the habits observed in my son's household. When I had the pleasure of seeing you at two o'clock to-day, in Kingsdown Crescent, I had another appointment in a distant part of London at three; and, in the hurry of the moment, one or two little matters escaped me, which I think I ought to impress on your attention.' The rest of the letter is not of the slightest importance, but the lines that I have just copied are well worthy of all the attention you can bestow on them. They have saved me from discovery, my dear, before I have been a week in Major Milroy's service!

"It happened no later than yesterday evening, and it began and ended in this manner: —

"There is a gentleman here (of whom I shall have more to say presently), who is an intimate friend of young Armadale's, and who bears the strange name of Midwinter. He contrived yesterday to speak to me alone in the park. Almost as soon as he opened his lips, I found that my name had been discovered in London (no doubt by the Somersetshire clergyman); and that Mr. Midwinter had been chosen (evidently by the same person) to identify the Miss Gwilt who had vanished from Brompton, with the Miss Gwilt who had appeared at Thorpe-Ambrose. You foresaw this danger,

I remember; but you could scarcely have imagined that the exposure would threaten me so soon.

"I spare you the details of our conversation, to come to the end. Mr. Midwinter put the matter very delicately; declaring, to my great surprise, that he felt quite certain himself, that I was not the Miss Gwilt of whom his friend was in search; and that he only acted as he did out of regard to the anxiety of a person whose wishes he was bound to respect. Would I assist him, in setting that anxiety completely at rest, as far as I was concerned, by kindly answering one plain question — which he had no other right to ask me than the right my indulgence might give him? The lost 'Miss Gwilt' had been missed on Monday last, at two o'clock, in the crowd on the platform of the North-Western Railway, in Euston Square. Would I authorize him to say, that on that day, and at that hour, the Miss Gwilt who was Major Milroy's governess, had never been near the place?

"I need hardly tell you that I seized the fine opportunity he had given me of disarming all future suspicion. I took a high tone on the spot, and met him with the old lady's letter. He politely refused to look at it. I insisted on his looking at it. 'I don't choose to be mistaken,' I said, 'for a woman who may be a bad character, because she happens to bear, or to have assumed, the same name as mine, I insist on your reading the first part of this letter for my satisfaction, if not for your own.' He was obliged to comply — and there was the proof, in the old lady's handwriting, that at two o'clock on Monday last, she and I were together in Kingsdown Crescent, which any directory would tell him is a 'crescent' in Bayswater!

I leave you to imagine his apologies, and the perfect sweetness with which I received them.

"I might, of course, if I had not preserved the letter, have referred him to you, or to the major's mother with similar results. As it is, the object has been gained without trouble or delay. *I have been proved not to be myself;* and one of the many dangers that threatened me at Thorpe-Ambrose is a danger blown over from this moment. Your housemaid's face may not be a very handsome one; but there is no denying that it has done us excellent service.

"So much for the past, now for the future. You shall hear how I get on with the people about me; and you shall judge for yourself what the chances are, for and against my becoming mistress of Thorpe-Ambrose.

"Let me begin with young Armadale — because it is beginning with good news. I have produced the right impression on him already, and heaven knows *that* is nothing to boast of! Any moderately good-looking woman who chose to take the trouble, could make him fall in love with her. He is a rattle-pated young fool — one of those noisy, rosy, light-haired, good-tempered men, whom I particularly detest. I had a whole hour alone with him in a boat, the first day I came here, and I have made good use of my time, I can tell you, from that day to this. The only difficulty with him is the difficulty of concealing my own feelings — especially when he turns my dislike of him into downright hatred, by sometimes reminding me of his mother. I really never saw a man whom I could use so ill, if I had the opportunity He will give me the opportunity, I believe, if no accident happens,

sooner than we calculated on. I have just returned from a party at the great house, in celebration of the rent-day dinner, and the squire's attentions to me, and my modest reluctance to receive them, have already excited general remark.

"My pupil, Miss Milroy, comes next. She too is rosy and foolish; and, what is more, awkward and squat and freckled, and ill-tempered and ill-dressed. No fear of *her*, though she hates me like poison, which is a great comfort, for I get rid of her out of lesson-time and walking-time. It is perfectly easy to see that she has made the most of her opportunities with young Armadale (opportunities, by-the-by, which we never calculated on); and that she has been stupid enough to let him slip through her fingers. When I tell you that she is obliged, for the sake of appearances, to go with her father and me to the little entertainments at Thorpe-Ambrose, and to see how young Armadale admires me, you will understand the kind of place I hold in her affections. She would try me past all endurance, if I didn't see that I aggravate her by keeping my temper — so of course I keep it. If I do break out, it will be over our lessons — not over our French, our grammar, history, and globes — but over our music. No words can say how I feel for her poor piano. Half the musical girls in England ought to have their fingers chopped off, in the interests of society — and if I had my way, Miss Milroy's fingers should be executed first.

"As for the major, I can hardly stand higher in his estimation than I stand already. I am always ready to make his breakfast — and his daughter is not. I can always find things for him when he loses them — and his daughter can't. I never yawn when he proses —

and his daughter does. I like the poor dear harmless old gentleman; so I won't say a word more about him.

"Well, here is a fair prospect for the future surely? My good Oldershaw, there never was a prospect yet, without an ugly place in it. *My* prospect has two ugly places in it. The name of one of them is, Mrs. Milroy; and the name of the other is, Mr. Midwinter.

"Mrs. Milroy first. Before I had been five minutes in the cottage, on the day of my arrival, what do you think she did? She sent down-stairs and asked to see me. The message startled me a little — after hearing from the old lady, in London, that her daughter-in-law was too great a sufferer to see anybody — but of course when I got her message, I had no choice but to go up-stairs to the sick-room. I found her bedridden with an incurable spinal complaint, and a really horrible object to look at — but with all her wits about her; and, if I am not greatly mistaken, as deceitful a woman, with as vile a temper, as you could find anywhere, in all your long experience. Her excessive politeness, and her keeping her own face in the shade of the bed-curtains while she contrived to keep mine in the light, put me on my guard the moment I entered the room. We were more than half an hour together, without my stepping into any one of the many clever little traps she laid for me. The only mystery in her behaviour, which I failed to see through at the time, was her perpetually asking me to bring her things (things she evidently did not want) from different parts of the room.

"Since then, events have enlightened me. My first suspicions were raised by overhearing some of the

servants' gossip; and I have been confirmed in my opinion by the conduct of Mrs. Milroy's nurse.

"On the few occasions when I have happened to be alone with the major, the nurse has also happened to want something of her master, and has invariably forgotten to announce her appearance by knocking at the door. Do you understand now, why Mrs. Milroy sent for me the moment I got into the house, and what she wanted, when she kept me going backwards and forwards, first for one thing and then for another? There is hardly an attractive light in which my face and figure can be seen, in which that woman's jealous eyes have not studied them already. I am no longer puzzled to know why the father and daughter started, and looked at each other, when I was first presented to them — or why the servants still stare at me with a mischievous expectation in their eyes, when I ring the bell and ask them to do anything. It is useless to disguise the truth, Mother Oldershaw, between you and me. When I went upstairs into that sick-room, I marched blindfold into the clutches of a jealous woman. If Mrs. Milroy *can* turn me out of the house, Mrs. Milroy *will* — and, morning and night, she has nothing else to do in that bed-prison of hers but to find out the way.

"In this awkward position, my own cautious conduct is admirably seconded by the dear old major's perfect insensibility. His wife's jealousy of him is as monstrous a delusion as any that could be found in a madhouse — it is the growth of her own vile temper, under the aggravation of an incurable illness. The poor man hasn't a thought beyond his mechanical pursuits; and I don't believe he knows at this moment, whether I am

a handsome woman or not. With this chance to help me, I may hope to set the nurse's intrusions and the mistress's contrivances at defiance — for a time, at any rate. But you know what a jealous woman is, and I think I know what Mrs. Milroy is; and I own I shall breathe more freely, on the day when young Armadale opens his foolish lips to some purpose, and sets the major advertising for a new governess.

"Armadale's name reminds me of Armadale's friend. There is more danger threatening in that quarter; and, what is worse, I don't feel half as well armed beforehand against Mr. Midwinter, as I do against Mrs. Milroy.

"Everything about this man is more or less mysterious, which I don't like to begin with. How does he come to be in the confidence of the Somersetshire clergyman? How much has that clergyman told him? How is it that he was so firmly persuaded, when he spoke to me in the park, that I was not the Miss Gwilt of whom his friend was in search? I haven't the ghost of an answer to give to any of those three questions. I can't even discover who he is, or how he and young Armadale first became acquainted. I hate him. No, I don't; I only want to find out about him. He is very young — little and lean, and active and dark, with bright black eyes which say to me plainly, 'We belong to a man with brains in his head and a will of his own; a man who hasn't always been hanging about a country house, in attendance on a fool.' Yes: I am positively certain Mr. Midwinter has done something or suffered something, in his past life, young as he is; and I would give I don't know what to get at it. Don't resent my taking up so much space in writing

about him. He has influence enough over young Armadale to be a very awkward obstacle in my way, unless I can secure his good opinion at starting.

"Well, you may ask, and what is to prevent your securing his good opinion? I am sadly afraid, Mother Oldershaw, I have got it on terms I never bargained for. I am sadly afraid the man is in love with me already.

"Don't toss your head, and say, 'Just like her vanity!' After the horrors I have gone through, I have no vanity left; and a man who admires me, is a man who makes me shudder. There was a time, I own — Pooh! what am I writing? Sentiment, I declare! Sentiment to *you!* Laugh away, my dear. As for me, I neither laugh nor cry; I mend my pen, and get on with my — what do the men call it? — my report.

"The only thing worth inquiring is, whether I am right or wrong in my idea of the impression I have made on him.

"Let me see — I have been four times in his company. The first time was in the major's garden, where we met unexpectedly, face to face. He stood looking at me, like a man petrified, without speaking a word. The effect of my horrid red hair, perhaps? Quite likely — let us lay it on my hair. The second time was in going over the Thorpe-Ambrose grounds, with young Armadale on one side of me, and my pupil (in the sulks) on the other. Out comes Mr. Midwinter to join us — though he had work to do in the steward's office, which he had never been known to neglect on any other occasion. Laziness, possibly? or an attachment to Miss Milroy? I can't say; we will lay it on Miss Milroy, if you like — I only know he did nothing

but look at *me*. The third time was at the private interview in the park, which I have told you of already. I never saw a man so agitated at putting a delicate question to a woman in my life. But *that* might have been only awkwardness; and his perpetually looking back after me when we had parted, might have been only looking back at the view. Lay it on the view; by all means lay it on the view! The fourth time was this very evening, at the little party. They made me play; and, as the piano was a good one, I did my best. All the company crowded round me, and paid me their compliments (my charming pupil paid hers, with a face like a cat's, just before she spits), except Mr. Midwinter. *He* waited till it was time to go, and then he caught me alone for a moment in the hall. There was just time for him to take my hand, and say two words. Shall I tell you *how* he took my hand, and what his voice sounded like when he spoke? Quite needless! You have always told me that the late Mr. Oldershaw doated on you. Just recall the first time he took your hand, and whispered a word or two addressed to your private ear. To what did you attribute his behaviour on that occasion? I have no doubt, if you had been playing on the piano in the course of the evening, you would have attributed it entirely to the music!

"No! you may take my word for it, the harm is done. *This* man is no rattle-pated fool, who changes his fancies as readily as he changes his clothes — the fire that lights those big black eyes of his, is not an easy fire, when a woman has once kindled it, for that woman to put out. I don't wish to discourage you; I don't say the chances are against us. But with Mrs. Milroy threatening me on one side, and Mr. Midwinter

on the other, the worst of all risks to run, is the risk of losing time. Young Armadale has hinted already, as well as such a lout can hint, at a private interview! Miss Milroy's eyes are sharp, and the nurse's eyes are sharper; and I shall lose my place if they either of them find me out. No matter! I must take my chance, and give him the interview. Only let me get him alone, only let me escape the prying eyes of the women, and — if his friend doesn't come between us — I answer for the result!

"In the meantime, have I anything more to tell you? Are there any other people in our way at Thorpe-Ambrose? Not another creature! None of the resident families call here, young Armadale being, most fortunately, in bad odour in the neighbourhood. There are no handsome highly-bred women to come to the house, and no persons of consequence to protest against his attentions to a governess. The only guests he could collect at his party to-night were the lawyer and his family (a wife, a son, and two daughters), and a deaf old woman, and *her* son — all perfectly unimportant people, and all obedient humble servants of the stupid young squire.

"Talking of obedient humble servants, there is one other person established here, who is employed in the steward's office — a miserable, shabby, dilapidated old man, named Bashwood. He is a perfect stranger to me, and I am evidently a perfect stranger to him; for he has been asking the housemaid at the cottage who I am. It is paying no great compliment to myself to confess it; but it is not the less true that I produced the most extraordinary impression on this feeble old creature the first time he saw me. He turned all

manner of colours, and stood trembling and staring at me, as if there was something perfectly frightful in my face. I felt quite startled for the moment, — for of all the ways in which men have looked at me, no man ever looked at me in that way before. Did you ever see the boa-constrictor fed at the Zoological Gardens? They put a live rabbit into his cage, and there is a moment when the two creatures look at each other. I declare Mr. Bashwood reminded me of the rabbit!

"Why do I mention this? I don't know why. Perhaps I have been writing too long, and my head is beginning to fail me. Perhaps Mr. Bashwood's manner of admiring me strikes my fancy by its novelty. Absurd! I am exciting myself, and troubling you about nothing. Oh! what a weary, long letter I have written! and how brightly the stars look at me through the window — and how awfully quiet the night is! Send me some more of those sleeping drops, and write me one of your nice, wicked, amusing letters. You shall hear from me again as soon as I know a little better how it is all likely to end. Good night, and keep a corner in your stony old heart for

"L. G."

3. — *From Mrs. Oldershaw to Miss Gwilt.*

"Diana Street, Pimlico, Monday.

"My dear Lydia, — I am in no state of mind to write you an amusing letter. Your news is very discouraging, and the recklessness of your tone quite alarms me. Consider the money I have already advanced, and the interests we both have at stake. Whatever else you are, don't be reckless, for heaven's sake!

"What can I do? — I ask myself, as a woman of business, what can I do to help you? I can't give you advice, for I am not on the spot, and I don't know how circumstances may alter from one day to another. Situated as we are now, I can only be useful in one way; I can discover a new obstacle that threatens you, and I think I can remove it.

"You say, with great truth, that there never was a prospect yet without an ugly place in it, and that there are two ugly places in your prospect. My dear, there may be *three* ugly places, if I don't bestir myself to prevent it; and the name of the third place will be — Brock! Is it possible you can refer, as you have done, to the Somersetshire clergyman, and not see that the progress you make with young Armadale will be, sooner or later, reported to him by young Armadale's friend? Why, now I think of it, you are doubly at the parson's mercy! You are at the mercy of any fresh suspicion which may bring him into the neighbourhood himself at a day's notice; and you are at the mercy of his interference the moment he hears that the squire is committing himself with a neighbour's governess. If I can do nothing else, I can keep this additional difficulty out of your way. And oh, Lydia, with what alacrity I shall exert myself, after the manner in which the old wretch insulted me when I told him that pitiable story in the street! I declare I tingle with pleasure at this new prospect of making a fool of Mr. Brock.

"And how is it to be done? Just as we have done it already, to be sure. He has lost 'Miss Gwilt' (otherwise my housemaid), hasn't he? Very well. He shall find her again, wherever he is now, suddenly settled within easy reach of him. As long as *she* stops in the

place, *he* will stop in it; and as we know he is not at Thorpe-Ambrose, there you are free of him! The old gentleman's suspicions have given us a great deal of trouble so far. Let us turn them to some profitable account at last; let us tie him, by his suspicions, to my housemaid's apron-string. Most refreshing. Quite a moral retribution, isn't it?

"The only help I need trouble you for, is help you can easily give. Find out from Mr. Midwinter where the parson is now, and let me know by return of post. If he is in London, I will personally assist my housemaid in the necessary mystification of him. If he is anywhere else, I will send her after him, accompanied by a person on whose discretion I can implicitly rely.

"You shall have the sleeping-drops to-morrow. In the meantime, I say at the end what I said at the beginning — no recklessness. Don't encourage poetical feelings by looking at the stars; and don't talk about the night being awfully quiet. There are people (in Observatories) paid to look at the stars for you — leave it to them. And as for the night, do what Providence intended you to do with the night when Providence provided you with eyelids — go to sleep in it.

"Affectionately yours,
"MARIA OLDERSHAW."

4. — *From the Reverend Decimus Brock to Ozias Midwinter.*

"Boscombe Rectory, West Somerset,
"Thursday, July 3rd.

"MY DEAR MIDWINTER, — One line before the post goes out, to relieve you of all sense of responsibility

at Thorpe-Ambrose, and to make my apologies to the lady who lives as governess in Major Milroy's family.

"*The* Miss Gwilt — or perhaps I ought to say, the woman calling herself by that name — has, to my unspeakable astonishment, openly made her appearance here, in my own parish! She is staying at the inn, accompanied by a plausible-looking man, who passes as her brother. What this audacious proceeding really means — unless it marks a new step in the conspiracy against Allan, taken under new advice — is, of course, more than I can yet find out.

"My own idea is, that they have recognized the impossibility of getting at Allan, without finding me (or you) as an obstacle in their way; and that they are going to make a virtue of necessity by boldly trying to open their communications through me. The man looks capable of any stretch of audacity; and both he and the woman had the impudence to bow when I met them in the village half an hour since. They have been making inquiries already about Allan's mother — here, where her exemplary life may set their closest scrutiny at defiance. If they will only attempt to extort money, as the price of the woman's silence on the subject of poor Mrs. Armadale's conduct in Madeira at the time of her marriage, they will find me well prepared for them beforehand. I have written by this post to my lawyers, to send a competent man to assist me; and he will stay at the rectory, in any character which he thinks it safest to assume under present circumstances.

"You shall hear what happens in the next day or two. "Always truly yours,

"Decimus Brock."

CHAPTER XII.

The Clouding of the Sky.

NINE days had passed, and the tenth day was nearly at an end, since Miss Gwilt and her pupil had taken their morning walk in the cottage garden.

The night was overcast. Since sunset, there had been signs in the sky from which the popular forecast had predicted rain. The reception-rooms at the great house were all empty and dark. Allan was away, passing the evening with the Milroys; and Midwinter was waiting his return — not where Midwinter usually waited, among the books in the library — but in the little back room which Allan's mother had inhabited in the last days of her residence at Thorpe-Ambrose.

Nothing had been taken away, but much had been added to the room, since Midwinter had first seen it. The books which Mrs. Armadale had left behind her, the furniture, the old matting on the floor, the old paper on the walls, were all undisturbed. The statuette of Niobe still stood on its bracket, and the French window still opened on the garden. But, now, to the relics left by the mother, were added the personal possessions belonging to the son. The wall, bare hitherto, was decorated with water-colour drawings — with a portrait of Mrs. Armadale, supported on one side by a view of the old house in Somersetshire, and on the other by a picture of the yacht. Among the books which bore in faded ink Mrs. Armadale's inscriptions, "From my father," were other books inscribed in the same handwriting, in brighter ink, "To my son."

Hanging to the wall, ranged on the chimney-piece, scattered over the table, were a host of little objects, some associated with Allan's past life, others necessary to his daily pleasures and pursuits, and all plainly testifying that the room which he habitually occupied at Thorpe-Ambrose was the very room which had once recalled to Midwinter the second vision of the dream. Here, strangely unmoved by the scene around him, so lately the object of his superstitious distrust, Allan's friend now waited composedly for Allan's return — and here, more strangely still, he looked on a change in the household arrangements, due in the first instance entirely to himself. His own lips had revealed the discovery which he had made on the first morning in the new house; his own voluntary act had induced the son to establish himself in the mother's room.

Under what motives had he spoken the words? Under no motives which were not the natural growth of the new interests and the new hopes that now animated him.

The entire change wrought in his convictions by the memorable event that had brought him face to face with Miss Gwilt, was a change which it was not in his nature to hide from Allan's knowledge. He had spoken openly, and had spoken as it was in his character to speak. The merit of conquering his superstition was a merit which he shrank from claiming, until he had first unsparingly exposed that superstition in its worst and weakest aspects to view.

It was only after he had unreservedly acknowledged the impulse under which he had left Allan at the Mere, that he had taken credit to himself for the new point of view from which he could now look at

the Dream. Then, and not till then, he had spoken of the fulfilment of the first Vision, as the doctor at the Isle of Man might have spoken of it. He had asked, as the doctor might have asked, Where was the wonder of their seeing a pool at sunset, when they had a whole network of pools within a few hours' drive of them? and what was there extraordinary in discovering a woman at the Mere, when there were roads that led to it, and villages in its neighbourhood, and boats employed on it, and pleasure parties visiting it? So again, he had waited to vindicate the firmer resolution with which he looked to the future, until he had first revealed all that he now saw himself of the errors of the past. The abandonment of his friend's interests, the unworthiness of the confidence that had given him the steward's place, the forgetfulness of the trust that Mr. Brock had reposed in him — all implied in the one idea of leaving Allan — were all pointed out. The glaring self-contradictions betrayed in accepting the Dream as the revelation of a fatality, and in attempting to escape that fatality by an exertion of free will — in toiling to store up knowledge of the steward's duties for the future, and in shrinking from letting the future find him in Allan's house — were, in their turn, unsparingly exposed. To every error, to every inconsistency, he resolutely confessed, before he ventured on the last simple appeal which closed all, "Will you trust me in the future? will you forgive and forget the past?"

A man who could thus open his whole heart, without one lurking reserve inspired by consideration for himself, was not a man to forget any minor act of concealment of which his weakness might have led him to

be guilty towards his friend. It lay heavy on Midwinter's conscience that he had kept secret from Allan a discovery which he ought in Allan's dearest interests to have revealed — the discovery of his mother's room.

But one doubt still closed his lips — the doubt whether Mrs. Armadale's conduct in Madeira had been kept secret on her return to England.

Careful inquiry, first among the servants, then among the tenantry, careful consideration of the few reports current at the time, as repeated to him by the few persons left who remembered them, convinced him at last that the family secret had been successfully kept within the family limits. Once satisfied that whatever inquiries the son might make would lead to no disclosure which could shake his respect for his mother's memory, Midwinter had hesitated no longer. He had taken Allan into the room, and had shown him the books on the shelves, and all that the writing in the books disclosed. He had said plainly, "My one motive for not telling you this before, sprang from my dread of interesting you in the room which I looked at with horror as the second of the scenes pointed at in the Dream. Forgive me this also, and you will have forgiven me all."

With Allan's love for his mother's memory, but one result could follow such an avowal as this. He had liked the little room from the first, as a pleasant contrast to the oppressive grandeur of the other rooms at Thorpe-Ambrose — and now that he knew what associations were connected with it, his resolution was at once taken to make it especially his own. The same day, all his personal possessions were collected and

arranged in his mother's room — in Midwinter's presence, and with Midwinter's assistance given to the work.

Under those circumstances had the change now wrought in the household arrangements been produced; and in this way had Midwinter's victory over his own fatalism — by making Allan the daily occupant of a room which he might otherwise hardly ever have entered — actually favoured the fulfilment of the Second Vision of the Dream.

The hour wore on quietly as Allan's friend sat waiting for Allan's return. Sometimes reading, sometimes thinking placidly, he wiled away the time. No vexing cares, no boding doubts troubled him now. The rent-day, which he had once dreaded, had come and gone harmlessly. A friendlier understanding had been established between Allan and his tenants; Mr. Bashwood had proved himself to be worthy of the confidence reposed in him; the Pedgifts, father and son, had amply justified their client's good opinion of them. Wherever Midwinter looked, the prospect was bright, the future was without a cloud.

He trimmed the lamp on the table beside him, and looked out at the night. The stable-clock was chiming the half-hour past eleven as he walked to the window, and the first raindrops were beginning to fall. He had his hand on the bell, to summon the servant, and send him over to the cottage with an umbrella, when he was stopped by hearing the familiar footstep on the walk outside.

"How late you are!" said Midwinter, as Allan en-

tered through the open French window. "Was there a party at the cottage?"

"No! only ourselves. The time slipped away somehow."

He answered in lower tones than usual, and sighed as he took his chair.

"You seem to be out of spirits?" pursued Midwinter. "What's the matter?"

Allan hesitated. "I may as well tell you," he said, after a moment. "It's nothing to be ashamed of; I only wonder you haven't noticed it before! There's a woman in it as usual — I'm in love."

Midwinter laughed. "Has Miss Milroy been more charming to-night than ever?" he asked, gaily.

"Miss Milroy!" repeated Allan. "What are you thinking of! I'm not in love with Miss Milroy."

"Who is it, then?"

"Who is it? What a question to ask! Who *can* it be but Miss Gwilt?"

There was a sudden silence. Allan sat listlessly, with his hands in his pockets, looking out through the open window at the falling rain. If he had turned towards his friend when he mentioned Miss Gwilt's name, he might possibly have been a little startled by the change he would have seen in Midwinter's face.

"I suppose you don't approve of it?" he said, after waiting a little.

There was no answer.

"It's too late to make objections," proceeded Allan. "I really mean it when I tell you I'm in love with her."

"A fortnight since you were in love with Miss Milroy," said the other in quiet, measured tones.

"Pooh! a mere flirtation. It's different this time. I'm in earnest about Miss Gwilt."

He looked round as he spoke. Midwinter turned his face aside on the instant, and bent it over a book.

"I see you don't approve of the thing," Allan went on. "Do you object to her being only a governess? You can't do that, I'm sure. If you were in my place, her being only a governess wouldn't stand in the way with *you?*"

"No," said Midwinter; "I can't honestly say it would stand in the way with me." He gave the answer reluctantly, and pushed his chair back out of the light of the lamp.

"A governess is a lady who is not rich," said Allan, in an oracular manner; "and a duchess is a lady who is not poor. And that's all the difference I acknowledge between them. Miss Gwilt is older than I am — I don't deny that. What age do you guess her at, Midwinter? I say, seven or eight and twenty. What do you say?"

"Nothing. I agree with you."

"Do you think seven or eight and twenty is too old for me? If you were in love with a woman yourself, you wouldn't think seven or eight and twenty too old — would you?"

"I can't say I should think it too old, if——"

"If you were really fond of her?"

Once more there was no answer.

"Well," resumed Allan, "if there's no harm in her being only a governess, and no harm in her being a little older than I am, what's the objection to Miss Gwilt?"

"I have made no objection."

"I don't say you have. But you don't seem to like the notion of it, for all that."

There was another pause. Midwinter was the first to break the silence this time.

"Are you sure of yourself, Allan?" he asked, with his face bent once more over the book; "are you really attached to this lady? Have you thought seriously already of asking her to be your wife?"

"I am thinking seriously of it at this moment," said Allan. "I can't be happy — I can't live without her. Upon my soul, I worship the very ground she treads on?"

"How long ——?" His voice faltered, and he stopped. "How long," he reiterated, "have you worshipped the very ground she treads on?"

"Longer than you think for. I know I can trust you with all my secrets ——"

"Don't trust me!"

"Nonsense! I *will* trust you. There is a little difficulty in the way, which I haven't mentioned yet. It's a matter of some delicacy, and I want to consult you about it. Between ourselves, I have had private opportunities with Miss Gwilt ——"

Midwinter suddenly started to his feet, and opened the door.

"We'll talk of this to-morrow," he said. "Good night."

Allan looked round in astonishment. The door was closed again, and he was alone in the room.

"He has never shaken hands with me!" exclaimed Allan, looking bewildered at the empty chair.

As the words passed his lips the door opened, and Midwinter appeared again.

"We haven't shaken hands," he said, abruptly. "God bless you, Allan! We'll talk of it to-morrow. Good night."

Allan stood alone at the window, looking out at the pouring rain. He felt ill at ease, without knowing why. "Midwinter's ways get stranger and stranger," he thought. "What can he mean by putting me off till to-morrow, when I wanted to speak to him to-night?" He took up his bedroom candle a little impatiently — put it down again — and, walking back to the open window, stood looking out in the direction of the cottage. "I wonder if she's thinking of me?" he said to himself softly.

She *was* thinking of him. She had just opened her desk to write to Mrs. Oldershaw; and her pen had that moment traced the opening line: — "Make your mind easy. I have got him!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Exit.

It rained all through the night; and when the morning came, it was raining still.

Contrary to his ordinary habit, Midwinter was waiting in the breakfast-room when Allan entered it. He looked worn and weary, but his smile was gentler, and his manner more composed than usual. To Allan's surprise he approached the subject of the previous night's conversation of his own accord as soon as the servant was out of the room.

"I am afraid you thought me very impatient and very abrupt with you last night," he said. "I will try to make amends for it this morning. I will hear everything you wish to say to me on the subject of Miss Gwilt."

"I hardly like to worry you," said Allan. "You look as if you had had a bad night's rest."

"I have not slept well for some time past," replied Midwinter quietly. "Something has been wrong with me. But I believe I have found out the way to put myself right again without troubling the doctors. Later in the morning I shall have something to say to you about this. Let us get back first to what you were talking of last night. You were speaking of some difficulty —" He hesitated, and finished the sentence in a tone so low that Allan failed to hear him. "Perhaps it would be better," he went on, "if, instead of speaking to me, you spoke to Mr. Brock?"

"I would rather speak to *you*," said Allan. "But tell me first, was I right or wrong last night in thinking you disapproved of my falling in love with Miss Gwilt?"

Midwinter's lean nervous fingers began to crumble the bread in his plate. His eyes looked away from Allan for the first time.

"If you have any objection," persisted Allan, "I should like to hear it."

Midwinter suddenly looked up again, his cheeks turning ashy pale, and his glittering black eyes fixed full on Allan's face.

"You love her," he said. "Does *she* love *you?*"

"You won't think me vain?" returned Allan. "I

told you yesterday I had had private opportunities with her —"

Midwinter's eyes dropped again to the crumbs on his plate. "I understand," he interposed quickly. "You were wrong last night. I had no objections to make."

"Don't you congratulate me?" asked Allan, a little uneasily. "Such a beautiful woman! such a clever woman!"

Midwinter held out his hand. "I owe you more than mere congratulations," he said. "In anything which is for your happiness I owe you help." He took Allan's hand, and wrung it hard. "Can I help you?" he asked, growing paler and paler as he spoke.

"My dear fellow?" exclaimed Allan, "what *is* the matter with you? Your hand is as cold as ice."

Midwinter smiled faintly. "I am always in extremes," he said; "my hand was as hot as fire the first time you took it at the old west-country inn. Come to that difficulty which you have not come to yet. You are young, rich, your own master — and she loves you. What difficulty can there be?"

Allan hesitated. "I hardly know how to put it," he replied. "As you said just now, I love her, and she loves me — and yet there is a sort of strangeness between us. One talks a good deal about one's self, when one is in love — at least I do. I've told her all about myself and my mother, and how I came in for this place, and the rest of it. Well — though it doesn't strike me when we are together — it comes across me now and then, when I'm away from her, that she doesn't say much on her side. In fact, I know no more about her than you do."

"Do you mean that you know nothing about Miss Gwilt's family and friends?"

"That's it, exactly."

"Have you never asked her about them?"

"I said something of the sort the other day," returned Allan; "and I'm afraid, as usual, I said it in the wrong way. She looked — I can't quite tell you how; not exactly displeased, but — oh, what things words are! I'd give the world, Midwinter, if I could only find the right word when I want it, as well as you do."

"Did Miss Gwilt say anything to you in the way of a reply?"

"That's just what I was coming too. She said, 'I shall have a melancholy story to tell you one of these days, Mr. Armadale, about myself and my family; but you look so happy and the circumstances are so distressing, that I have hardly the heart to speak of it now.' Ah, *she* can express herself — with the tears in her eyes, my dear fellow, with the tears in her eyes! Of course I changed the subject directly. And now the difficulty is how to get back to it, delicately, without making her cry again. We *must* get back to it, you know. Not on my account; I am quite content to marry her first and hear of her family misfortunes, poor thing, afterwards. But I know Mr. Brock. If I can't satisfy him about her family when I write to tell him of this (which of course I must do), he will be dead against the whole thing. I'm my own master of course, and I can do as I like about it. But dear old Brock was such a good friend to my poor mother, and he has been such a good friend to me — you see what I mean, don't you?"

"Certainly, Allan; Mr. Brock has been your second father. Any disagreement between you about such a serious matter as this, would be the saddest thing that could happen. You ought to satisfy him that Miss Gwilt is (what I am sure Miss Gwilt will prove to be) worthy, in every way worthy —" His voice sank in spite of him, and he left the sentence unfinished.

"Just my feeling in the matter!" Allan struck in glibly. "Now we can come to what I particularly wanted to consult you about. If this was your case, Midwinter, you would be able to say the right words to her — you would put it delicately, even though you were putting it quite in the dark. I can't do that. I'm a blundering sort of fellow; and I'm horribly afraid, if I can't get some hint at the truth to help me at starting, of saying something to distress her. Family misfortunes are such tender subjects to touch on — especially with such a refined woman, such a tender-hearted woman, as Miss Gwilt. There may have been some dreadful death in the family — some relation who has disgraced himself — some infernal cruelty which has forced the poor thing out on the world as a governess. Well, turning it over in my mind, it struck me that the major might be able to put me on the right tack. It is quite possible that he might have been informed of Miss Gwilt's family circumstances before he engaged her — isn't it?"

"It is possible, Allan, certainly."

"Just my feeling again! My notion is, to speak to the major. If I could only get the story from him first, I should know so much better how to speak to Miss Gwilt about it afterwards. You advise me to try the major, don't you?"

There was a pause before Midwinter replied. When he did answer it was a little reluctantly.

"I hardly know how to advise you, Allan," he said. "This is a very delicate matter."

"I believe you would try the major if you were in my place," returned Allan, reverting to his inveterately personal way of putting the question.

"Perhaps I might," said Midwinter, more and more unwillingly. "But if I did speak to the major, I should be very careful, in your place, not to put myself in a false position; I should be very careful to let no one suspect me of the meanness of prying into a woman's secrets behind her back."

Allan's face flushed. "Good heavens, Midwinter," he exclaimed, "who could suspect me of that?"

"Nobody, Allan, who really knows you."

"The major knows me. The major is the last man in the world to misunderstand me. All I want him to do, is to help me (if he can) to speak about a delicate subject to Miss Gwilt, without hurting her feelings. Can anything be simpler between two gentlemen?"

Instead of replying, Midwinter, still speaking as constrainedly as ever, asked a question on his side. "Do you mean to tell Major Milroy," he said, "what your intentions really are towards Miss Gwilt?"

Allan's manner altered. He hesitated and looked confused.

"I have been thinking of that," he replied; "and I mean to feel my way first, and then tell him or not afterwards, as matters turn out."

A proceeding so cautious as this, was too strikingly

inconsistent with Allan's character not to surprise any one who knew him. Midwinter showed his surprise plainly.

"You forget that foolish flirtation of mine with Miss Milroy," Allan went on, more confusedly. "The major may have noticed it, and may have thought I meant — well, what I didn't mean. It might be rather awkward, mightn't it, to propose to his face for his governess instead of his daughter?"

He waited for a word of answer, but none came. Midwinter opened his lips to speak, and suddenly checked himself. Allan, uneasy at his silence, doubly uneasy under certain recollections of the major's daughter which the conversation had called up, rose from the table, and shortened the interview a little impatiently.

"Come! come!" he said, "don't sit there looking unutterable things; don't make mountains out of mole-hills. You have such an old, old head, Midwinter, on those young shoulders of yours? Let's have done with all these pros and cons. Do you mean to tell me in plain words, that it won't do to speak to the major?"

"I can't take the responsibility, Allan, of telling you that. To be plainer still, I can't feel confident of the soundness of any advice I may give you in — in our present position towards each other. All I am sure of is, that I cannot possibly be wrong in entreating you to do two things."

"What are they?"

"If you speak to Major Milroy, pray remember the caution I have given you! Pray think of what you say before you say it!"

"I'll think — never fear! What next?"

"Before you take any serious step in this matter, write and tell Mr. Brock. Will you promise me to do that?"

"With all my heart. Anything more?"

"Nothing more. I have said my last words."

Allan led the way to the door. "Come into my room," he said, "and I'll give you a cigar. The servants will be in here directly, to clear away; and I want to go on talking about Miss Gwilt."

"Don't wait for me," said Midwinter; "I'll follow you in a minute or two."

He remained seated until Allan had closed the door — then rose, and took from a corner of the room, where it lay hidden behind one of the curtains, a knapsack ready packed for travelling. As he stood at the window thinking, with the knapsack in his hand, a strangely old, careworn look stole over his face: he seemed to lose the last of his youth in an instant.

What the woman's quicker insight had discovered days since, the man's slower perception had only realized in the past night. The pang that had wrung him when he heard Allan's avowal, had set the truth self-revealed before Midwinter for the first time. He had been conscious of looking at Miss Gwilt with new eyes and a new mind, on the next occasion when they met after the memorable interview in Major Milroy's garden — but he had never until now known the passion that she had roused in him for what it really was. Knowing it at last, feeling it consciously in full possession of him, he had the courage which no man

with a happier experience of life would have possessed — the courage to recall what Allan had confided to him, and to look resolutely at the future through his own grateful remembrances of the past.

Steadfastly, through the sleepless hours of the night, he had bent his mind to the conviction that he must conquer the passion which had taken possession of him, for Allan's sake; and that the one way to conquer it was — to go. No after-doubt as to the sacrifice had troubled him when morning came; and no after-doubt troubled him now. The one question that kept him hesitating was the question of leaving Thorpe-Ambrose. Though Mr. Brock's letter relieved him from all necessity of keeping watch in Norfolk for a woman who was known to be in Somersetshire; though the duties of the steward's office were duties which might be safely left in Mr. Bashwood's tried and trustworthy hands — still, admitting these considerations, his mind was not easy at the thought of leaving Allan at a time when a crisis was approaching in Allan's life.

He slung the knapsack loosely over his shoulder, and put the question to his conscience for the last time. "Can you trust yourself to see her, day by day, as you must see her — can you trust yourself to hear him talk of her, hour by hour, as you must hear him — if you stay in this house?" Again the answer came, as it had come all through the night. Again his heart warned him, in the very interests of the friendship that he held sacred, to go while the time was his own; to go before the woman who had possessed herself of his love had possessed herself of his

power of self-sacrifice and his sense of gratitude as well.

He looked round the room mechanically, before he turned to leave it. Every remembrance of the conversation that had just taken place between Allan and himself pointed to the same conclusion, and warned him, as his own conscience had warned him, to go.

Had he honestly mentioned any one of the objections which he, or any man, must have seen to Allan's attachment? Had he — as his knowledge of his friend's facile character bound him to do — warned Allan to distrust his own hasty impulses, and to test himself by time and absence, before he made sure that the happiness of his whole life was bound up in Miss Gwilt? No. The bare doubt whether, in speaking of these things, he could feel that he was speaking disinterestedly, had closed his lips, and would close his lips for the future, till the time for speaking had gone by. Was the right man to restrain Allan, the man who would have given the world, if he had it, to stand in Allan's place? There was but one plain course of action that an honest man and a grateful man could follow in the position in which he stood. Far removed from all chance of seeing her, and from all chance of hearing of her — alone with his own faithful recollection of what he owed to his friend — he might hope to fight it down, as he had fought down the tears in his childhood, under his gipsy master's stick; as he had fought down the misery of his lonely youth-time in the country bookseller's shop. "I must go," he said, as he turned wearily from the window, "before she comes to the house again. I must go before another hour is over my head.

With that resolution he left the room; and, in leaving it, took the irrevocable step from Present to Future.

The rain was still falling. The sullen sky, all round the horizon, still lowered watery and dark, when Midwinter, equipped for travelling, appeared in Allan's room.

"Good heaven's!" cried Allan, pointing to the knapsack, "what does *that* mean?"

"Nothing very extraordinary," said Midwinter. "It only means — good-by."

"Good-by!" repeated Allan, starting to his feet in astonishment.

Midwinter put him back gently into his chair, and drew a seat near to it for himself.

"When you noticed that I looked ill this morning," he said, "I told you that I had been thinking of a way to recover my health, and that I meant to speak to you about it later in the day. That later time has come. I have been out of sorts, as the phrase is, for some time past. You have remarked it yourself, Allan, more than once; and, with your usual kindness, you have allowed it to excuse many things in my conduct which would have been otherwise unpardonable, even in your friendly eyes."

"My dear fellow," interposed Allan, "you don't mean to say you are going out on a walking tour in this pouring rain!"

"Never mind the rain," rejoined Midwinter. "The rain and I are old friends. You know something, Allan, of the life I led before you met with me. From

the time when I was a child, I have been used to hardship and exposure. Night and day, sometimes for months together, I never had my head under a roof For years and years, the life of a wild animal — perhaps I ought to say, the life of a savage — was the life I led, while you were at home and happy. I have the leaven of the vagabond — the vagabond animal, or the vagabond man, I hardly know which — in me still. Does it distress you to hear me talk of myself in this way? I won't distress you. I will only say that the comfort and the luxury of our life here are, at times, I think, a little too much for a man to whom comforts and luxuries come as strange things. I want nothing to put me right again but more air and exercise; fewer good breakfasts and dinners, my dear friend, than I get here. Let me go back to some of the hardships which this comfortable house is expressly made to shut out. Let me meet the wind and weather as I used to meet them when I was a boy; let me feel weary again for a little while, without a carriage near to pick me up; and hungry when the night falls, with miles of walking between my supper and me. Give me a week or two away, Allan — up northward, on foot, to the Yorkshire moors — and I promise to return to Thorpe-Ambrose, better company for you and for your friends. I shall be back before you have time to miss me. Mr. Bashwood will take care of the business in the office; it is only for a fortnight, and it is for my own good — let me go!"

"I don't like it," said Allan. "I don't like your leaving me in this sudden manner. There's something so strange and dreary about it. Why not try riding, if you want more exercise; all the horses in the stables

are at your disposal. At all events, you can't possibly go to-day. Look at the rain!"

Midwinter looked towards the window, and gently shook his head.

"I thought nothing of the rain," he said, "when I was a mere child, getting my living with the dancing dogs — why should I think anything of it now? *My* getting wet, and *your* getting wet, Allan, are two very different things. When I was a fisherman's boy in the Hebrides, I hadn't a dry thread on me for weeks together."

"But you're not in the Hebrides now," persisted Allan; "and I expect our friends from the cottage to-morrow evening. You can't start till after to-morrow. Miss Gwilt is going to give us some more music, and you know you like Miss Gwilt's playing."

Midwinter turned aside to buckle the straps of his knapsack. "Give me another chance of hearing Miss Gwilt when I come back," he said, with his head down, and his fingers busy at the straps.

"You have one fault, my dear fellow, and it grows on you," remonstrated Allan; "when you have once taken a thing into your head, you're the most obstinate man alive. There's no persuading you to listen to reason. If you *will* go," added Allan, suddenly rising as Midwinter took up his hat and stick in silence, "I have half a mind to go with you, and try a little roughing it too!"

"Go with *me!*" repeated Midwinter, with a momentary bitterness in his tone, "and leave Miss Gwilt!"

Allan sat down again, and admitted the force of the objection in significant silence. Without a word more on his side, Midwinter held out his hand to take

leave. They were both deeply moved, and each was anxious to hide his agitation from the other. Allan took the last refuge which his friend's firmness left to him, he tried to lighten the farewell moment by a joke.

"I'll tell you what," he said, "I begin to doubt if you're quite cured yet of your belief in the Dream. I suspect you're running away from me, after all!"

Midwinter looked at him, uncertain whether he was in jest or earnest. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"What did you tell me," retorted Allan, "when you took me in here the other day, and made a clean breast of it? What did you say about this room and the second vision of the dream? By Jupiter!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet once more, "now I look again, here *is* the Second Vision! There's the rain pattering against the window — there's the lawn and the garden outside — here am I where I stood in the Dream — and there are you where the Shadow stood. The whole scene complete, out of doors and in; and *I've* discovered it this time!"

A moment's life stirred again in the dead remains of Midwinter's superstition. His colour changed; and he eagerly, almost fiercely, disputed Allan's conclusion.

"No!" he said, pointing to the little marble figure on the bracket, "the scene is *not* complete — you have forgotten something as usual. The Dream is wrong this time, thank God — utterly wrong! In the vision you saw, the statue was lying in fragments on the floor; and you were stooping over them with a troubled and an angry mind. There stands the statue safe and sound! — and you haven't the vestige of an angry

feeling in your mind, have you?" He seized Allan impulsively by the hand. At the same moment the consciousness came to him that he was speaking and acting as earnestly as if he still believed in the Dream. The colour rushed back over his face, and he turned away in confused silence.

"What did I tell you?" said Allan, laughing a little uneasily. "That night on the Wreck is hanging on your mind as heavily as ever."

"Nothing hangs heavy on me," retorted Midwinter, with a sudden outburst of impatience, "but the knapsack on my back, and the time I'm wasting here. I'll go out, and see if it's likely to clear up."

"You'll come back?" interposed Allan.

Midwinter opened the French window, and stepped out into the garden.

"Yes," he said, answering with all his former gentleness of manner, "I'll come back in a fortnight. Good-by, Allan; and good luck with Miss Gwilt!"

He pushed the window to, and was away across the garden before his friend could open it again and follow him.

Allan rose, and took one step into the garden; then checked himself at the window, and returned to his chair. He knew Midwinter well enough to feel the total uselessness of attempting to follow him, or to call im back. He was gone, and for two weeks to come hthere was no hope of seeing him again. An hour or more passed, the rain still fell, and the sky still threatened. A heavier and heavier sense of loneliness and despondency — the sense of all others which his previous life had least fitted him to understand and endure — possessed itself of Allan's mind. In sheer horror

of his own uninhabitably solitary house, he rang for his hat and umbrella, and resolved to take refuge in the major's cottage.

"I might have gone a little way with him," thought Allan, his mind still running on Midwinter as he put on his hat. "I should like to have seen the dear old fellow fairly started on his journey."

He took his umbrella. If he had noticed the face of the servant who gave it to him, he might possibly have asked some questions, and might have heard some news to interest him in his present frame of mind. As it was, he went out without looking at the man, and without suspecting that his servants knew more of Midwinter's last moments at Thorpe-Ambrose than he knew himself. Not ten minutes since, the grocer and butcher had called in to receive payment of their bills — and the grocer and the butcher had seen how Midwinter started on his journey.

The grocer had met him first, nor far from the house, stopping on his way, in the pouring rain, to speak to a little ragged imp of a boy, the pest of the neighbourhood. The boy's customary impudence had broken out even more unrestrainedly than usual at the sight of the gentleman's knapsack. And what had the gentleman done in return? He had stopped and looked distressed, and had put his two hands gently on the boy's shoulders. The grocer's own eyes had seen that; and the grocer's own ears had heard him say, "Poor little chap! I know how the wind gnaws and the rain wets through a ragged jacket, better than most people who have got a good coat on their backs." And with those words he had put his hand in his pocket, and had rewarded the boy's impudence with a present of a shilling.

"Wrong hereabouts," said the grocer, touching his forehead. "That's my opinion of Mr. Armadale's friend!"

The butcher had seen him farther on in the journey, at the other end of the town. He had stopped — again in the pouring rain — and this time to look at nothing more remarkable than a half-starved cur, shivering on a doorstep. "I had my eye on him," said the butcher; "and what do you think he did? He crossed the road over to my shop, and bought a bit of meat fit for a Christian. Very well. He says good morning, and crosses back again; and, on the word of a man, down he goes on his knees on the wet doorstep, and out he takes his knife, and cuts up the meat, and gives it to the dog. Meat, I tell you again, fit for a Christian! I'm not a hard man, ma'am," concluded the butcher, addressing the cook, "but meat's meat; and it will serve your master's friend right if he lives to want it."

With those old unforgotten sympathies of the old unforgotten time to keep him company on his lonely road, he had left the town behind him, and had been lost to view in the misty rain. The grocer and the butcher had seen the last of him, and had judged a great nature, as all natures *are* judged from the grocer and the butcher point of view.

THE END OF THE SECOND BOOK.

BOOK THE THIRD.

CHAPTER I.

Mrs. Milroy.

Two days after Midwinter's departure from Thorpe-Ambrose, Mrs. Milroy having completed her morning toilette, and having dismissed her nurse, rang the bell again five minutes afterwards, and on the woman's reappearance, asked impatiently, if the post had come in.

"Post?" echoed the nurse. "Haven't you got your watch? Don't you know that it's a good-half-hour too soon to ask for your letters?" She spoke with the confident insolence of a servant long accustomed to presume on her mistress's weakness, and her mistress's necessities. Mrs. Milroy, on her side, appeared to be well used to her nurse's manner; she gave her orders composedly, without noticing it.

"When the postman does come," she said, "see him yourself. I am expecting a letter which I ought to have had two days since. I don't understand it. I'm beginning to suspect the servants."

The nurse smiled contemptuously. "Who will you suspect next?" she asked. "There! don't put yourself out. I'll answer the gate-bell this morning; and we'll see if I can't bring you a letter when the postman comes." Saying those words, with the tone and manner

of a woman who is quieting a fractious child, the nurse, without waiting to be dismissed, left the room.

Mrs. Milroy turned slowly and wearily on her bed, when she was left by herself again, and let the light from the window fall on her face.

It was the face of a woman who had once been handsome, and who was still, so far as years went, in the prime of her life. Long-continued suffering of body, and long-continued irritation of mind, had worn her away — in the roughly-expressive popular phrase — to skin and bone. The utter wreck of her beauty was made a wreck horrible to behold, by her desperate efforts to conceal the sight of it from her own eyes, from the eyes of her husband and her child, from the eyes even of the doctor who attended her, and whose business it was to penetrate to the truth. Her head, from which the greater part of the hair had fallen off, would have been less shocking to see than the hideously youthful wig, by which she tried to hide the loss. No deterioration of her complexion, no wrinkling of her skin, could have been so dreadful to look at as the rouge that lay thick on her cheeks, and the white enamel plastered on her forehead. The delicate lace, and the bright trimming on her dressing-gown, the ribbons in her cap, and the rings on her bony fingers, all intended to draw the eye away from the change that had passed over her, directed the eye to it on the contrary; emphasized it; made it by sheer force of contrast more hopeless and more horrible than it really was. An illustrated book of the fashions, in which women were represented exhibiting their finery by means of the free use of their limbs, lay on the bed from which she had not moved for years, without being

lifted by her nurse. A hand-glass was placed with the book so that she could reach it easily. She took up the glass after her attendant had left the room, and looked at her face with an unblushing interest and attention which she would have been ashamed of herself at the age of eighteen.

"Older and older, and thinner and thinner!" she said. "The major will soon be a free man — but I'll have that red-haired hussy out of the house first!"

She dropped the looking-glass on the counterpane, and clenched the hand that held it. Her eyes suddenly riveted themselves on a little crayon portrait of her husband hanging on the opposite wall; they looked at the likeness with the hard and cruel brightness of the eyes of a bird of prey. "Red is your taste in your old age, is it?" she said to the portrait. "Red 'hair and a scrofulous complexion and a padded figure, a ballet-girl's walk, and a pickpocket's light fingers. *Miss* Gwilt! *Miss*, with those eyes, and that walk!" She turned her head suddenly on the pillow, and burst into a harsh, jeering laugh. "*Miss*!" she repeated over and over again, with the venomously-pointed emphasis of the most merciless of all human forms of contempt — the contempt of one woman for another.

The age we live in is an age which finds no human creature inexcusable. Is there an excuse for Mrs. Milroy? Let the story of her life answer the question.

She had married the major at an unusually early age; and, in marrying him, had taken a man for her husband who was old enough to be her father — a man who, at that time, had the reputation, and not unjustly, of having made the freest use of his social gifts, and his advantages of personal appearance in the

society of women. Indifferently educated, and below her husband in station, she had begun by accepting his addresses under the influence of her own flattered vanity, and had ended by feeling the fascination which Major Milroy had exercised over women infinitely her mental superiors, in his earlier life. He had been touched, on his side, by her devotion, and had felt, in his turn, the attraction of her beauty, her freshness, and her youth. Up to the time when their little daughter and only child had reached the age of eight years, their married life had been an unusually happy one. At that period, the double misfortune fell on the household, of the failure of the wife's health, and the almost total loss of the husband's fortune; and from that moment, the domestic happiness of the married pair was virtually at an end.

Having reached the age when men in general are readier, under the pressure of calamity, to resign themselves than to resist, the major had secured the little relics of his property, had retired into the country, and had patiently taken refuge in his mechanical pursuits. A woman nearer to him in age, or a woman with a better training and more patience of disposition than his wife possessed, would have understood the major's conduct, and have found consolation in the major's submission. Mrs. Milroy found consolation in nothing. Neither nature nor training helped her to meet resignedly the cruel calamity which had struck at her in the bloom of womanhood and the prime of beauty. The curse of incurable sickness blighted her at once and for life.

Suffering can, and does, develope the latent evil that there is in humanity, as well as the latent good.

The good that was in Mrs. Milroy's nature shrank up, under that subtly-deteriorating influence in which the evil grew and flourished. Month by month as she became the weaker woman physically, she became the worse woman morally. All that was mean, cruel, and false in her, expanded in steady proportion to the contraction of all that had once been generous, gentle, and true. Old suspicions of her husband's readiness to relapse into the irregularities of his bachelor life, which, in her healthier days of mind and body, she had openly confessed to him — which she had always sooner or later seen to be suspicions that he had not deserved — came back, now that sickness had divorced her from him, in the form of that baser conjugal distrust which keeps itself cunningly secret; which gathers together its inflammatory particles atom by atom into a heap, and sets the slowly-burning frenzy of jealousy alight in the mind. No proof of her husband's blameless and patient life that could now be shown to Mrs. Milroy; no appeal that could be made to her respect for herself, or for her child growing up to womanhood, availed to dissipate the terrible delusion born of her hopeless illness, and growing steadily with its growth. Like all other madness it had its ebb and flow, its time of spasmodic outburst, and its time of deceitful repose — but active or passive, it was always in her. It had injured innocent servants, and insulted blameless strangers. It had brought the first tears of shame and sorrow into her daughter's eyes, and had set the deepest lines that scored it in her husband's face. It had made the secret misery of the little household for years — and it was now to pass beyond the family limits, and to influence coming events at Thorpe-Ambrose, in which the future

interests of Allan and Allan's friend were vitally concerned.

A moment's glance at the posture of domestic affairs in the cottage, prior to the engagement of the new governess, is necessary to the due appreciation of the serious consequences that followed Miss Gwilt's appearance on the scene.

On the marriage of the governess who had lived in his service for many years (a woman of an age and an appearance to set even Mrs. Milroy's jealousy at defiance), the major had considered the question of sending his daughter away from home, far more seriously than his wife supposed. He was conscious that scenes took place in the house at which no young girl should be present; but he felt an invincible reluctance to apply the one efficient remedy — the keeping his daughter away from home in school-time and holiday-time alike. The struggle thus raised in his mind once set at rest, by the resolution to advertise for a new governess, Major Milroy's natural tendency to avoid trouble rather than to meet it, had declared itself in its customary manner. He had closed his eyes again on his home anxieties as quietly as usual, and had gone back, as he had gone back on hundreds of previous occasions, to the consoling society of his old friend the clock.

It was far otherwise with the major's wife. The chance which her husband had entirely overlooked, that the new governess who was to come might be a younger and a more attractive woman than the old governess who had gone, was the first chance that presented itself as possible to Mrs. Milroy's mind. She had said nothing. Secretly waiting, and secretly nursing her inveterate distrust, she had encouraged her husband

and her daughter to leave her on the occasion of the picnic, with the express purpose of making an opportunity for seeing the new governess alone. The governess had shown herself; and the smouldering fire of Mrs. Milroy's jealousy had burst into flame, in the moment when she and the handsome stranger first set eyes on each other.

The interview over, Mrs. Milroy's suspicions fastened at once and immovably on her husband's mother.

She was well aware that there was no one else in London on whom the major could depend to make the necessary inquiries; she was well aware that Miss Gwilt had applied for the situation, in the first instance, as a stranger answering an advertisement published in a newspaper. Yet knowing this, she had obstinately closed her eyes, with the blind frenzy of the blindest of all the passions, to the facts straight before her; and, looking back to the last of many quarrels between them which had ended in separating the elder lady and herself, had seized on the conclusion that Miss Gwilt's engagement was due to her mother-in-law's vindictive enjoyment of making mischief in her household. The inference which the very servants themselves, witnesses of the family scandal, had correctly drawn — that the major's mother, in securing the services of a well-recommended governess for her son, had thought it no part of her duty to consider that governess's looks in the purely fanciful interests of the major's wife — was an inference which it was simply impossible to convey into Mrs. Milroy's mind. Miss Gwilt had barely closed the sick-room door when the whispered words hissed out of Mrs. Milroy's lips,

"Before another week is over your head, my lady, you go!"

From that moment, through the wakeful night and the weary day, the one object of the bedridden woman's life was to procure the new governess's dismissal from the house.

The assistance of the nurse, in the capacity of spy, was secured — as Mrs. Milroy had been accustomed to secure other extra services which her attendant was not bound to render her — by a present of a dress from the mistress's wardrobe. One after another, articles of wearing apparel which were now useless to Mrs. Milroy, had ministered in this way to feed the nurse's greed — the insatiable greed of an ugly woman for fine clothes. Bribed with the smartest dress she had secured yet, the household spy took her secret orders, and applied herself with a vile enjoyment of it to her secret work.

The days passed, the work went on — but nothing had come of it. Mistress and servant had a woman to deal with who was a match for both of them.

Repeated intrusions on the major, when the governess happened to be in the same room with him, failed to discover the slightest impropriety of word, look, or action, on either side. Stealthy watching and listening at the governess's bedroom door, detected that she kept a light in her room at late hours of the night, and that she groaned and ground her teeth in her sleep — and detected nothing more. Careful superintendence in the day-time, proved that she regularly posted her own letters, instead of giving them to the servant; and that on certain occasions when the occupation of her hours out of lesson-time and walking-time was left at her own disposal, she had been suddenly

missed from the garden, and then caught coming back alone to it from the park. Once and once only, the nurse had found an opportunity of following her out of the garden — had been detected immediately in the park — and had been asked with the most exasperating politeness, if she wished to join Miss Gwilt in a walk. Small circumstances of this kind, which were sufficiently suspicious to the mind of a jealous woman, were discovered in abundance. But circumstances, on which to found a valid ground of complaint that might be laid before the major, proved to be utterly wanting. Day followed day, and Miss Gwilt remained persistently correct in her conduct, and persistently irreproachable in her relations towards her employer and her pupil.

Foiled in this direction, Mrs. Milroy tried next to find an assailable place in the statement which the governess's reference had made on the subject of the governess's character.

Obtaining from the major the minutely careful report which his mother had addressed to him on this topic, Mrs. Milroy read and re-read it, and failed to find the weak point of which she was in search in any part of the letter. All the customary questions on such occasions had been asked, and all had been scrupulously and plainly answered. The one sole opening for an attack which it was possible to discover, was an opening which showed itself, after more practical matters had been all disposed of, in the closing sentences of the letter.

"I was so struck" (the passage ran) "by the grace and distinction of Miss Gwilt's manners, that I took an

opportunity, when she was out of the room, of asking how she first came to be governess. 'In the usual way,' I was told. 'A sad family misfortune, in which she behaved nobly. She is a very sensitive person, and shrinks from speaking of it among strangers — a natural reluctance which I have always felt it a matter of delicacy to respect.' Hearing this, of course I felt the same delicacy on my side. It was no part of my duty to intrude on the poor thing's private sorrows; my only business was to do, what I have now done, to make sure that I was engaging a capable and respectable governess to instruct my grandchild."

After careful consideration of these lines, Mrs. Milroy having a strong desire to find the circumstances suspicious, found them suspicious accordingly. She determined to sift the mystery of Miss Gwilt's family misfortunes to the bottom, on the chance of extracting from it something useful to her purpose. There were two ways of doing this. She might begin by questioning the governess herself, or she might begin by questioning the governess's reference. Experience of Miss Gwilt's quickness of resource in dealing with awkward questions at their introductory interview, decided her on taking the latter course. "I'll get the particulars from the reference first," thought Mrs. Milroy, "and then question the creature herself, and see if the two stories agree."

The letter of inquiry was short and scrupulously to the point.

Mrs. Milroy began by informing her correspondent that the state of her health necessitated leaving her daughter entirely under the governess's influence and control. On that account she was more anxious than

most mothers to be thoroughly informed in every respect about the person to whom she confided the entire charge of an only child; and, feeling this anxiety, she might perhaps be excused for putting what might be thought, after the excellent character Miss Gwilt had received, a somewhat unnecessary question. With that preface, Mrs. Milroy came to the point, and requested to be informed of the circumstances which had obliged Miss Gwilt to go out as a governess.

The letter, expressed in these terms, was posted the same day. On the morning when the answer was due, no answer appeared. The next morning arrived, and still there was no reply. When the third morning came, Mrs. Milroy's impatience had broken loose from all restraint. She had rung for the nurse in the manner which has been already recorded, and had ordered the woman to be in waiting to receive the letters of the morning with her own hands. In this position matters now stood; and in these domestic circumstances the new series of events at Thorpe-Ambrose took their rise.

Mrs. Milroy had just looked at her watch, and had just put her hand once more to the bell-pull, when the door opened and the nurse entered the room.

"Has the postman come?" asked Mrs. Milroy.

The nurse laid a letter on the bed without answering, and waited, with unconcealed curiosity, to watch the effect which it produced on her mistress.

Mrs. Milroy tore open the envelope the instant it was in her hand. A printed paper appeared (which she threw aside), surrounding a letter (which she looked at) in her own handwriting! She snatched up the printed

paper. It was the customary Post-Office circular, informing her that her letter had been duly presented at the right address, and that the person whom she had written to was not to be found.

"Something wrong?" asked the nurse, detecting a change in her mistress's face.

The question passed unheeded. Mrs. Milroy's writing-desk was on the table at the bedside. She took from it the letter which the major's mother had written to her son, and turned to the page containing the name and address of Miss Gwilt's reference. "Mrs. Mandeville, 18, Kingsdown Crescent, Bayswater," she read eagerly to herself, and then looked at the address on her own returned letter. No error had been committed; the directions were identically the same.

"Something wrong?" reiterated the nurse, advancing a step nearer to the bed.

"Thank God — yes!" cried Mrs. Milroy, with a sudden outburst of exultation. She tossed the Post-Office circular to the nurse, and beat her bony hands on the bed-clothes, in an ecstasy of anticipated triumph. "Miss Gwilt's an impostor! Miss Gwilt's an impostor! If I die for it, Rachel, I'll be carried to the window to see the police take her away!"

"It's one thing to say she's an impostor behind her back, and another thing to prove it to her face," remarked the nurse. She put her hand as she spoke into her apron pocket, and, with a significant look at her mistress, silently produced a second letter.

"For me?" asked Miss Milroy.

"No," said the nurse, "for Miss Gwilt."

The two women eyed each other, and understood each other without another word.

"Where is she?" said Mrs. Milroy.

The nurse pointed in the direction of the park. "Out again, for another walk before breakfast — by herself."

Mrs. Milroy beckoned to the nurse to stoop close over her. "Can you open it, Rachel?" she whispered.

Rachel nodded.

"Can you close it again, so that nobody would know?"

"Can you spare the scarf that matches your pearl-grey dress?" asked Rachel.

"Take it!" said Mrs. Milroy, impatiently.

The nurse opened the wardrobe in silence; took the scarf in silence; and left the room in silence. In less than five minutes she came back with the envelope of Miss Gwilt's letter open in her hand.

"Thank you, ma'am, for the scarf," said Rachel, putting the opened letter composedly on the counterpane of the bed.

Mrs. Milroy looked at the envelope. It had been closed as usual by means of adhesive gum, which had been made to give way by the application of steam. As Mrs. Milroy took out the letter, her hand trembled violently, and the white enamel parted into cracks over the wrinkles on her forehead.

Rachel withdrew to the window to keep watch on the park. "Don't hurry," she said. "No signs of her yet."

Mrs. Milroy still paused, keeping the all-important morsel of paper folded in her hand. She could have taken Miss Gwilt's life — but she hesitated at reading Miss Gwilt's letter.

"Are you troubled with scruples?" asked the nurse,

with a sneer. "Consider it a duty you owe to your daughter."

"You wretch!" said Mrs. Milroy. With that expression of opinion, she opened the letter.

It was evidently written in great haste — was undated — and was signed in initials only. Thus it ran: —

"Diana Street.

"My dear Lydia, — The cab is waiting at the door, and I have only a moment to tell you that I am obliged to leave London, on business, for three or four days, or a week at longest. My letters will be forwarded if you write. I got yours yesterday, and I agree with you that it is very important to put him off the awkward subject of yourself and your family as long as you safely can. The better you know him, the better you will be able to make up the sort of story that will do. Once told, you will have to stick to it — and, *having* to stick to it, beware of making it complicated, and beware of making it in a hurry. I will write again about this, and give you my own ideas. In the meantime, don't risk meeting him too often in the park. — Yours, M. O."

"Well?" asked the nurse, returning to the bedside. "Have you done with it?"

"Meeting him in the park?" repeated Mrs. Milroy, with her eyes still fastened on the letter. "*Him!* Rachel, where is the major?"

"In his own room."

"I don't believe it!"

"Have your own way. I want the letter and the envelope."

"Can you close it again so that she won't know?"

"What I can open I can shut. Anything more?"

"Nothing more."

Mrs. Milroy was left alone again, to review her plan of attack by the new light that had now been thrown on Miss Gwilt.

The information that had been gained, by opening the governess's letter, pointed plainly to the conclusion that an adventuress had stolen her way into the house by means of a false reference. But having been obtained by an act of treachery which it was impossible to acknowledge, it was not information that could be used either for warning the major or for exposing Miss Gwilt. The one available weapon in Mrs. Milroy's hands was the weapon furnished by her own returned letter — and the one question to decide was how to make the best and speediest use of it.

The longer she turned the matter over in her mind, the more hasty and premature seemed the exultation which she had felt at the first sight of the Post-Office circular. That a lady acting as reference to a governess should have quitted her residence without leaving any trace behind her, and without even mentioning an address to which her letters could be forwarded, was a circumstance in itself sufficiently suspicious to be mentioned to the major. But Mrs. Milroy, however perverted her estimate of her husband might be in some respects, knew enough of his character to be assured that, if she told him what had happened, he would frankly appeal to the governess herself for an explanation. Miss Gwilt's quickness and cunning would, in that case, produce some plausible answer on the spot, which the major's partiality would be only too ready

to accept; and she would at the same time, no doubt, place matters in train, by means of the post, for the due arrival of all needful confirmation on the part of her accomplice in London. To keep strict silence for the present, and to institute (without the governess's knowledge) such inquiries as might be necessary to the discovery of undeniable evidence, was plainly the only safe course to take with such a man as the major, and with such a woman as Miss Gwilt. Helpless herself, to whom could Mrs. Milroy commit the difficult and dangerous task of investigation? The nurse, even if she was to be trusted, could not be spared at a day's notice, and could not be sent away without the risk of exciting remark. Was there any other competent and reliable person to employ, either at Thorpe-Ambrose or in London? Mrs. Milroy turned from side to side of the bed, searching every corner of her mind for the needful discovery, and searching in vain. "Oh, if I could only lay my hand on some man I could trust!" she thought, despairingly. "If I only knew where to look for somebody to help me!"

As the idea passed through her mind, the sound of her daughter's voice startled her from the other side of the door.

"May I come in?" asked Neelie.

"What do you want?" returned Mrs. Milroy, impatiently.

"I have brought up your breakfast, mamma."

"My breakfast?" repeated Mrs. Milroy, in surprise. "Why doesn't Rachel bring it up as usual?" She considered a moment, and then called out sharply, "Come in!"

CHAPTER II.

The Man is Found.

NEELIE entered the room, carrying the tray with the tea, the dry toast, and the pat of butter which composed the invalid's invariable breakfast.

"What does this mean?" asked Mrs. Milroy, speaking and looking as she might have spoken and looked if the wrong servant had come into the room.

Neelie put the tray down on the bedside table. "I thought I should like to bring you up your breakfast, mamma, for once in a way," she replied, "and I asked Rachel to let me."

"Come here," said Mrs. Milroy, "and wish me good morning."

Neelie obeyed. As she stooped to kiss her mother, Mrs. Milroy caught her by the arm, and turned her roughly to the light. There were plain signs of disturbance and distress in her daughter's face. A deadly thrill of terror ran through Mrs. Milroy on the instant. She suspected that the opening of the letter had been discovered by Miss Gwilt, and that the nurse was keeping out of the way in consequence.

"Let me go, mamma," said Neelie, shrinking under her mother's grasp. "You hurt me."

"Tell me why you have brought up my breakfast this morning," persisted Mrs. Milroy.

"I have told you, mamma."

"You have *not!* You have made an excuse — I see it in your face, Come! what is it?"

Neelie's resolution gave way before her mother's.

She looked aside uneasily at the things in the tray. "I have been vexed," she said with an effort; "and I didn't want to stop in the breakfast-room, I wanted to come up here, and to speak to you."

"Vexed? Who has vexed you? What has happened? Has Miss Gwilt anything to do with it?"

Neelie looked round again at her mother in sudden curiosity and alarm. "Mamma!" she said, "you read my thoughts — I declare you frighten me. It *was* Miss Gwilt."

Before Mrs. Milroy could say a word more on her side, the door opened, and the nurse looked in.

"Have you got what you want?" she asked as composedly as usual. "Miss, there, insisted on taking your tray up this morning. Has she broken anything?"

"Go to the window — I want to speak to Rachel," said Mrs. Milroy.

As soon as her daughter's back was turned, she beckoned eagerly to the nurse. "Anything wrong?" she asked in a whisper. "Do you think she suspects us?"

The nurse turned away with her hard sneering smile. "I told you it should be done," she said, "and it *has* been done. She hasn't the ghost of a suspicion. I waited in the room — and I saw her take up the letter and open it."

Mrs. Milroy drew a deep breath of relief. "Thank you," she said, loud enough for her daughter to hear. "I want nothing more."

The nurse withdrew; and Neelie came back from the window. Mrs. Milroy took her by the hand, and looked at her more attentively and more kindly than

usual. Her daughter interested her that morning — for her daughter had something to say on the subject of Miss Gwilt.

"I used to think that you promised to be pretty, child," she said, cautiously resuming the interrupted conversation in the least direct way. "But you don't seem to be keeping your promise. You look out of health and out of spirits — what is the matter with you?"

If there had been any sympathy between mother and child, Neelie might have owned the truth. She might have said frankly, "I am looking ill, because my life is miserable to me. I am fond of Mr. Armadale, and Mr. Armadale was once fond of me. We had one little disagreement, only one, in which I was to blame. I wanted to tell him so at the time, and I have wanted to tell him so ever since — and Miss Gwilt stands between us and prevents me. She has made us like strangers; she has altered him, and taken him away from me. He doesn't look at me as he did; he doesn't speak to me as he did; he is never alone with me as he used to be; I can't say the words to him that I long to say; and I can't write to him, for it would look as if I wanted to get him back. It is all over between me and Mr. Armadale, — and it is that woman's fault. There is ill-blood between Miss Gwilt and me the whole day long; and say what I may, and do what I may, she always gets the better of me, and always puts me in the wrong. Everything I saw at Thorpe-Ambrose pleased me, everything I did at Thorpe-Ambrose made me happy, before she came. Nothing pleases me, and nothing makes me happy now!" If Neelie had ever been

accustomed to ask her mother's advice and to trust herself to her mother's love, she might have said such words as these. As it was, the tears came into her eyes, and she hung her head in silence.

"Come!" said Mrs. Milroy, beginning to lose patience. "You have something to say to me about Miss Gwilt. What is it?"

Neelie forced back her tears, and made an effort to answer.

"She aggravates me beyond endurance, mamma; I can't bear her; I shall do something —" Neelie stopped, and stamped her foot angrily on the floor. I shall throw something at her head, if we go on much longer like this! I should have thrown something this morning if I hadn't left the room. Oh, do speak to papa about it! do find out some reason for sending her away! I'll go to school — I'll do anything in the world to get rid of Miss Gwilt!"

"To get rid of Miss Gwilt!" At those words — at that echo from her daughter's lips, of the one dominant desire kept secret in her own heart — Mrs. Milroy slowly raised herself in bed. What did it mean? Was the help she wanted coming from the very last of all quarters in which she could have thought of looking for it?

"Why do you want to get rid of Miss Gwilt," she asked. "What have you got to complain of?"

"Nothing!" said Neelie. "That's the aggravation of it. Miss Gwilt won't let me have anything to complain of. She is perfectly detestable; she is driving me mad; and she is the pink of propriety all the time. I daresay it's wrong, but I don't care — I hate her!"

Mrs. Milroy's eyes questioned her daughter's face as they had never questioned it yet. There was something under the surface, evidently — something which it might be of vital importance to her own purpose to discover — which had not risen into view. She went on probing her way deeper and deeper into Neelie's mind, with a warmer and warmer interest in Neelie's secret.

"Pour me out a cup of tea," she said; "and don't excite yourself, my dear. Why do you speak to *me* about this? why don't you speak to your father?"

"I have tried to speak to papa," said Neelie. "But it's no use; he is too good to know what a wretch she is. She is always on her best behaviour with him; she is always contriving to be useful to him. I can't make him understand why I dislike Miss Gwilt. — I can't make *you* understand — I only understand it myself." She tried to pour out the tea, and in trying upset the cup. "I'll go downstairs again!" exclaimed Neelie, with a burst of tears. "I'm not fit for anything — I can't even pour out a cup of tea!"

Mrs. Milroy seized her hand, and stopped her. Trifling as it was, Neelie's reference to the relations between the major and Miss Gwilt had roused her mother's ready jealousy. The restraints which Mrs. Milroy had laid on herself thus far, vanished in a moment — vanished, even in the presence of a girl of sixteen, and that girl her own child!

"Wait here!" she said eagerly. "You have come to the right place and the right person. Go on abusing Miss Gwilt. I like to hear you — I hate her too!"

"You, mamma!" exclaimed Neelie, looking at her mother in astonishment.

For a moment, Mrs. Milroy hesitated before she said more. Some last-left instinct of her married life in its earlier and happier time, pleaded hard with her to respect the youth and the sex of her child. But jealousy respects nothing; in the heaven above and on the earth beneath, nothing but itself. The slow fire of self-torment burning night and day in the miserable woman's breast, flashed its deadly light into her eyes, as the next words dropped slowly and venomously from her lips.

"If you had had eyes in your head you would never have gone to your father;" she said. "Your father has reasons of his own for hearing nothing that you can say, or that anybody can say, against Miss Gwilt."

Many girls at Neelie's age would have failed to see the meaning hidden under those words. It was the daughter's misfortune, in this instance, to have had experience enough of the mother to understand her. Neelie started back from the bedside, with her face in a glow. "Mamma!" she said, "you are talking horribly! Papa is the best and dearest and kindest — oh, I won't hear it! — I won't hear it!"

Mrs. Milroy's fierce temper broke out in an instant — broke out all the more violently from her feeling herself, in spite of herself, to have been in the wrong.

"You impudent little fool!" she retorted furiously, "do you think I want *you* to remind me of what I owe to your father? Am I to learn how to speak of your father, and how to think of your father, and how to love and honour your father, from a froward little

minx like you! I was finely disappointed, I can tell you, when you were born — I wished for a boy, you impudent hussy! If you ever find a man who is fool enough to marry you, he will be a lucky man if you only love him half as well, a quarter as well, a hundred-thousandth part as well, as I loved your father. Ah, you can cry when it's too late; you can come creeping back to beg your mother's pardon after you have insulted her. You little dowdy, half-grown creature! I was handsomer than ever you will be when I married your father — I would have gone through fire and water to serve your father! If he had asked me to cut off one of my arms, I would have done it — I would have done it to please him!" She turned suddenly with her face to the wall — forgetting her daughter, forgetting her husband, forgetting everything but the torturing remembrance of her lost beauty. "My arms!" she repeated to herself, faintly. "What arms I had when I was young!" She snatched up the sleeve of her dressing-gown furtively, with a shudder. "Oh, look at it now! look at it now!"

Neelie fell on her knees at the bedside, and hid her face. In sheer despair of finding comfort and help anywhere else, she had cast herself impulsively on her mother's mercy — and this was how it had ended! "Oh, mamma," she pleaded, "you know I didn't mean to offend you! I couldn't help it when you spoke so of my father. Oh, do, do forgive me."

Mrs. Milroy turned again on her pillow, and looked at her daughter vacantly. "Forgive you?" she repeated with her mind still in the past, groping its way back darkly to the present.

"I beg your pardon, mamma — I beg your pardon

on my knees. I am so unhappy; I do so want a little kindness? Won't you forgive me?"

"Wait a little," rejoined Mrs. Milroy. "Ah," she said, after an interval, "now I know! Forgive you? Yes — I'll forgive you on one condition." She lifted Neelie's head, and looked her searchingly in the face. "Tell me why you hate Miss Gwilt! You've a reason of your own for hating her, and you haven't confessed it yet."

Neelie's head dropped again. The burning colour that she was hiding by hiding her face, showed itself on her neck. Her mother saw it, and gave her time.

"Tell me," reiterated Mrs. Milroy, more gently, "why do you hate her?"

The answer came reluctantly, a word at a time, in fragments.

"Because she is trying—"

"Trying what?"

"Trying to make somebody who is much —"

"Much what?"

"Much too young for her —"

"Marry her?"

"Yes, mamma."

Breathlessly interested, Mrs. Milroy leaned forward, and twined her hand caressingly in her daughter's hair.

"Who is it, Neelie?" she asked, in a whisper.

"You will never say I told you, mamma?"

"Never! Who is it?"

"Mr. Armadale."

Mrs. Milroy leaned back on her pillow in dead silence. The plain betrayal of her daughter's first love, by her daughter's own lips, which would have ab-

sorbed the whole attention of other mothers, failed to occupy her for a moment. Her jealousy, distorting all things to fit its own conclusions, was busied in distorting what she had just heard. "A blind," she thought, "which has deceived my girl. It doesn't deceive *me*. Is Miss Gwilt likely to succeed?" she asked aloud. "Does Mr. Armadale show any sort of interest in her?"

Neelie looked up at her mother for the first time. The hardest part of the confession was over now — she had revealed the truth about Miss Gwilt, and she had openly mentioned Allan's name.

"He shows the most unaccountable interest," she said. "It's impossible to understand it. It's downright infatuation — I haven't patience to talk about it!"

"How do *you* come to be in Mr. Armadale's secrets?" inquired Mrs. Milroy. "Has he informed *you*, of all the people in the world, of his interest in Miss Gwilt?"

"Me!" exclaimed Neelie, indignantly. "It's quite bad enough that he should have told papa."

At the reappearance of the major in the narrative, Mrs. Milroy's interest in the conversation rose to its climax. She raised herself again from the pillow. "Get a chair," she said. "Sit down, child, and tell me all about it. Every word, mind — every word!"

"I can only tell you, mamma, what papa told me."

"When?"

"Saturday. I went in with papa's lunch to the workshop, and he said, 'I have just had a visit from Mr. Armadale; and I want to give you a caution while I think of it.' I didn't say anything, mamma — I

only waited. Papa went on, and told me that Mr. Armadale had been speaking to him on the subject of Miss Gwilt, and that he had been asking a question about her which nobody in his position had a right to ask. Papa said he had been obliged, good-humouredly, to warn Mr. Armadale to be a little more delicate, and a little more careful next time. I didn't feel much interested, mamma — it didn't matter to *me* what Mr. Armadale said or did. Why should I care about it?"

"Never mind yourself," interposed Mrs. Milroy, sharply. "Go on with what your father said. What was he doing when he was talking about Miss Gwilt? How did he look?"

"Much as usual, mamma. He was walking up and down the workshop; and I took his arm and walked up and down with him."

"I don't care what *you* were doing," said Mrs. Milroy, more and more irritably. "Did your father tell you what Mr. Armadale's question was — or did he not?"

"Yes, mamma. He said Mr. Armadale began by mentioning that he was very much interested in Miss Gwilt, and he then went on to ask whether papa could tell him anything about her family misfortunes —"

"What!!!" cried Mrs. Milroy. The word burst from her almost in a scream, and the white enamel on her face cracked in all directions. "Mr. Armadale said *that?*" she went on, leaning out farther and farther over the side of the bed.

Neelie started up, and tried to put her mother back on the pillow.

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"Mamma!" she exclaimed, "are you in pain? are you ill? You frighten me!"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing," said Mrs. Milroy. She was too violently agitated to make any other than the commonest excuse. "My nerves are bad this morning — don't notice it. I'll try the other side of the pillow. Go on! go on! I'm listening, though I'm not looking at you." She turned her face to the wall, and clenched her trembling hands convulsively beneath the bed-clothes. "I've got her!" she whispered to herself, under her breath. "I've got her at last!"

"I'm afraid I've been talking too much," said Neelie; "I'm afraid I've been stopping here too long. Shall I go downstairs, mamma, and come back later in the day?"

"Go on," repeated Mrs. Milroy, mechanically. "What did your father say next? Anything more about Mr. Armadale?"

"Nothing more, except how papa answered him," replied Neelie. "Papa repeated his own words when he told me about it. He said, 'In the absence of any confidence volunteered by the lady herself, Mr. Armadale, all I know or wish to know — and you must excuse me for saying, all any one else need know or wish to know — is, that Miss Gwilt gave me a perfectly satisfactory reference before she entered my house.' Severe, mamma, wasn't it? I don't pity him in the least — he richly deserved it. The next thing was papa's caution to *me*. He told me to check Mr. Armadale's curiosity if he applied to me next. As if he was likely to apply to me! and as if I should listen to him if he did! That's all, mamma. You won't suppose, will you, that I have told you this because I want to

hinder Mr. Armadale from marrying Miss Gwilt. Let him marry her if he pleases — I don't care!" said Neelie, in a voice that faltered a little, and with a face which was hardly composed enough to be in perfect harmony with a declaration of indifference. "All I want is to be relieved from the misery of having Miss Gwilt for my governess. I'd rather go to school. I should like to go to school. My mind's quite changed about all that — only I haven't the heart to tell papa. I don't know what's come to me — I don't seem to have heart enough for anything now — and when papa takes me on his knee in the evening, and says, 'Let's have a talk, Neelie,' he makes me cry. Would you mind breaking it to him, mamma, that I've changed my mind, and I want to go to school?" The tears rose thickly in her eyes, and she failed to see that her mother never even turned on the pillow to look round at her.

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Milroy, vacantly. "You're a good girl; you shall go to school."

The cruel brevity of the reply, and the tone in which it was spoken, told Neelie plainly that her mother's attention had been wandering far away from her, and that it was useless and needless to prolong the interview. She turned aside quietly, without a word of remonstrance. It was nothing new in her experience, to find herself shut out from her mother's sympathies. She looked at her eyes in the glass, and, pouring out some cold water, bathed her face. "Miss Gwilt shan't see I've been crying!" thought Neelie, as she went back to the bedside to take her leave. "I've tired you out, mamma," she said gently. "Let me go now; and

let me come back a little later when you have had some rest."

"Yes," repeated her mother, as mechanically as ever; "a little later when I have had some rest."

Neelie left the room. The minute after the door had closed on her, Mrs. Milroy rang the bell for her nurse. In the face of the narrative she had just heard, in the face of every reasonable estimate of probabilities, she held to her own jealous conclusions as firmly as ever. "Mr. Armadale may believe her, and my daughter may believe her," thought the furious woman. "But I know the major — and she can't deceive *me!*"

The nurse came in. "Prop me up," said Mrs. Milroy. "And give me my desk. I want to write."

"You're excited," replied the nurse. "You're not fit to write."

"Give me the desk," reiterated Mrs. Milroy.

"Anything more?" asked Rachel, repeating her invariable formula as she placed the desk on the bed.

"Yes. Come back in half-an-hour. I shall want you to take a letter to the great house."

The nurse's sardonic composure deserted her for once. "Mercy on us!" she exclaimed, with an accent of genuine surprise. "What next? You don't mean to say you're going to write——?"

"I am going to write to Mr. Armadale," interposed Mrs. Milroy; "and you are going to take the letter to him, and wait for an answer — and, mind this, not a living soul but our two selves must know of it in the house."

"Why are you writing to Mr. Armadale?" asked Rachel. "And why is nobody to know of it but our two selves?"

"Wait," rejoined Mrs. Milroy; "and you will see."

The nurse's curiosity, being a woman's curiosity, declined to wait.

"I'll help you, with my eyes open," she said. "But I won't help you blindfold."

"Oh, if I only had the use of my limbs!" groaned Mrs. Milroy. "You wretch, if I could only do without you!"

"You have the use of your head," retorted the impenetrable nurse. "And you ought to know better than to trust me by halves, at this time of day."

It was brutally put; but it was true — doubly true, after the opening of Miss Gwilt's letter. Mrs. Milroy gave way.

"What do you want to know?" she asked. "Tell me — and leave me."

"I want to know what you are writing to Mr. Armadale about?"

"About Miss Gwilt."

"What has Mr. Armadale to do with you and Miss Gwilt?"

Mrs. Milroy held up the letter that had been returned to her by the authorities at the Post-Office.

"Stoop," she said. "Miss Gwilt may be listening at the door. I'll whisper."

The nurse stooped, with her eye on the door.

"You know that the postman went with this letter to Kingsdown Crescent?" said Mrs. Milroy. "And you know that he found Mrs. Mandeville gone away, nobody could tell where?"

"Well," whispered Rachel, "what next?"

"This, next. When Mr. Armadale gets the letter that I am going to write to him, he will follow the

same road as the postman — and we'll see what happens when he knocks at Mrs. Mandeville's door."

"How do you get him to the door?"

"I tell him to go to Miss Gwilt's reference."

"Is he sweet on Miss Gwilt?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" said the nurse. "I see!"

CHAPTER III.

The Brink of Discovery.

THE morning of the interview between Mrs. Milroy and her daughter, at the cottage, was a morning of serious reflection for the squire, at the great house.

Even Allan's easy-tempered nature had not been proof against the disturbing influences exercised on it by the events of the last three days. Midwinter's abrupt departure had vexed him; and Major Milroy's reception of his inquiries relating to Miss Gwilt weighed unpleasantly on his mind. Since his visit to the cottage, he had felt impatient and ill at ease, for the first time in his life, with everybody who came near him. Impatient with Pedgift Junior, who had called on the previous evening to announce his departure for London on business the next day, and to place his services at the disposal of his client; ill at ease with Miss Gwilt, at a secret meeting with her in the park that morning; and ill at ease in his own company, as he now sat moodily smoking in the solitude of his room. "I can't live this sort of life much longer," thought Allan. "If nobody will help me to put the awkward question to

Miss Gwilt, I must stumble on some way of putting it for myself."

What way? The answer to that question was as hard to find as ever. Allan tried to stimulate his sluggish invention by walking up and down the room, and was disturbed by the appearance of the footman at the first turn.

"Now then! what is it?" he asked impatiently.

"A letter, sir; and the person waits for an answer."

Allan looked at the address. It was in a strange handwriting. He opened the letter; and a little note enclosed in it dropped to the ground. The note was directed, still in the strange handwriting, to "Mrs. Mandeville, 18, Kingsdown Crescent, Bayswater. Favoured by Mr. Armadale." More and more surprised, Allan turned for information to the signature at the end of the letter. It was "Anne Milroy."

"Anne Milroy?" he repeated. "It must be the major's wife. What can she possibly want with me?"

By way of discovering what she wanted, Allan did at last what he might more wisely have done at first. He sat down to read the letter.

["Private."] "The Cottage, Monday.

"DEAR SIR, — The name at the end of these lines will, I fear, recall to you a very rude return made on my part, some time since, for an act of neighbourly kindness on yours. I can only say in excuse, that I am a great sufferer, and that if I was ill-tempered enough, in a moment of irritation under severe pain, to send back your present of fruit, I have regretted doing so ever since. Attribute this letter, if you please, to my desire to make some atonement, and to my wish

to be of service to our good friend and landlord if I possibly can.

"I have been informed of the question which you addressed to my husband the day before yesterday, on the subject of Miss Gwilt. From all I have heard of you, I am quite sure that your anxiety to know more of this charming person than you know now, is an anxiety proceeding from the most honourable motives. Believing this, I feel a woman's interest — incurable invalid as I am — in assisting you. If you are desirous of becoming acquainted with Miss Gwilt's family circumstances without directly appealing to Miss Gwilt herself, it rests with you to make the discovery — and I will tell you how.

"It so happens that some few days since, I wrote privately to Miss Gwilt's reference on this very subject. I had long observed that my governess was singularly reluctant to speak of her family and her friends; and without attributing her silence to other than perfectly proper motives I felt it my duty to my daughter to make some inquiry on the subject. The answer that I have received is satisfactory as far as it goes. My correspondent informs me that Miss Gwilt's story is a very sad one, and that her own conduct throughout has been praiseworthy in the extreme. The circumstances (of a domestic nature, as I gather,) are all plainly stated in a collection of letters now in the possession of Miss Gwilt's reference. This lady is perfectly willing to let me see the letters — but not possessing copies of them, and being personally responsible for their security, she is reluctant, if it can be avoided, to trust them to the post; and she begs me to wait until

she or I can find some reliable person who can be employed to transmit the packet from her hands to mine.

"Under these circumstances, it has struck me that you might possibly, with your interest in the matter, be not unwilling to take charge of the papers. If I am wrong in this idea, and if you are not disposed, after what I have told you, to go to the trouble and expense of a journey to London, you have only to burn my letter and enclosure, and to think no more about it. If you decide on becoming my envoy, I gladly provide you with the necessary introduction to Mrs. Mandeville. You have only, on presenting it, to receive the letters in a sealed packet, to send them here on your return to Thorpe-Ambrose, and to wait an early communication from me acquainting you with the result.

"In conclusion, I have only to add that I see no impropriety in your taking (if you feel so inclined) the course that I propose to you. Miss Gwilt's manner of receiving such allusions as I have made to her family circumstances, has rendered it unpleasant for me (and would render it quite impossible for you) to seek information in the first instance from herself. I am certainly justified in applying to her reference; and you are certainly not to blame for being the medium of safely transmitting a sealed communication from one lady to another. If I find in that communication family secrets which cannot honourably be mentioned to any third person, I shall of course be obliged to keep you waiting until I have first appealed to Miss Gwilt. If I find nothing recorded but what is to her honour, and what is sure to raise her still higher in your estimation, I am undeniably doing her a service by taking

you into my confidence. This is how I look at the matter — but pray don't allow me to influence *you*.

"In any case, I have one condition to make, which I am sure you will understand to be indispensable. The most innocent actions are liable, in this wicked world, to the worst possible interpretation. I must, therefore, request that you will consider this communication as *strictly private*. I write to you in a confidence which is on no account (until circumstances may, in my opinion, justify the revelation of it) to extend beyond our two selves.

"Believe me, dear sir, truly yours,

"Anne Milroy."

In this tempting form the unscrupulous ingenuity of the major's wife had set the trap. Without a moment's hesitation, Allan followed his impulses as usual, and walked straight into it — writing his answer, and pursuing his own reflections simultaneously, in a highly characteristic state of mental confusion.

"By Jupiter, this *is* kind of Mrs. Milroy!" ("My dear madam.") "Just the thing I wanted, at the time when I needed it most!" ("I don't know how to express my sense of your kindness, except by saying that I will go to London and fetch the letters with the greatest pleasure.") "She shall have a basket of fruit regularly every day, all through the season." ("I will go at once, dear madam, and be back to-morrow.") "Ah, nothing like the women for helping one when one is in love! This is just what my poor mother would have done in Mrs. Milroy's place." ("On my word of honour as a gentleman, I will take the utmost care of the letters — and keep the thing strictly

private, as you request.") "I would have given five hundred pounds to anybody who would have put me up to the right way to speak to Miss Gwilt — and here is this blessed woman does it for nothing." ("Believe me, my dear madam, gratefully yours, Allan Armadale.")

Having sent his reply out to Mrs. Milroy's messenger, Allan paused in a momentary perplexity. He had an appointment with Miss Gwilt in the park for the next morning. It was absolutely necessary to let her know that he would be unable to keep it; she had forbidden him to write, and he had no chance that day of seeing her alone. In this difficulty, he determined to let the necessary intimation reach her through the medium of a message to the major, announcing his departure for London on business, and asking if he could be of service to any member of the family. Having thus removed the only obstacle to his freedom of action, Allan consulted the time-table, and found, to his disappointment, that there was a good hour to spare before it would be necessary to drive to the railway-station. In his existing frame of mind, he would infinitely have preferred starting for London in a violent hurry.

When the time came at last, Allan, on passing the steward's office, drummed at the door, and called through it, to Mr. Bashwood, "I'm going to town — back to-morrow." There was no answer from within; and the servant interposing, informed his master that Mr. Bashwood, having no business to attend to that day, had locked up the office, and had left some hours since.

On reaching the station, the first person whom Allan encountered was Pedgift Junior, going to London on the legal business which he had mentioned on the

previous evening, at the great house. The necessary explanations exchanged, it was decided that the two should travel in the same carriage. Allan was glad to have a companion; and Pedgift, enchanted as usual to make himself useful to his client, bustled away to get the tickets and see to the luggage. Sauntering to and fro on the platform until his faithful follower returned, Allan came suddenly upon no less a person than Mr. Bashwood himself — standing back in a corner with the guard of the train, and putting a letter (accompanied, to all appearance, by a fee) privately into the man's hand.

"Hullo!" cried Allan in his hearty way. "Something important there, Mr. Bashwood — eh?"

If Mr. Bashwood had been caught in the act of committing murder, he could hardly have shown greater alarm than he now testified at Allan's sudden discovery of him. Snatching off his dingy old hat, he bowed bareheaded, in a palsy of nervous trembling from head to foot. "No, sir, no, sir; only a little letter, a little letter, a little letter," said the deputy-steward, taking refuge in reiteration, and bowing himself swiftly backwards out of his employer's sight.

Allan turned carelessly on his heel. "I wish I could take to that fellow," he thought — "but I can't; he's such a sneak! What the deuce was there to tremble about? Does he think I want to pry into his secrets?"

Mr. Bashwood's secret on this occasion concerned Allan more nearly than Allan supposed. The letter which he had just placed in charge of the guard was nothing less than a word of warning addressed to Mrs. Oldershaw, and written by Miss Gwilt.

"If you can hurry your business" (wrote the major's governess) "do so, and come back to London immediately. Things are going wrong here, and Miss Milroy is at the bottom of the mischief. This morning she insisted on taking up her mother's breakfast, always on other occasions taken up by the nurse. They had a long confabulation in private; and half an hour later I saw the nurse slip out with a letter, and take the path that leads to the great house. The sending of the letter has been followed by young Armadale's sudden departure for London — in the face of an appointment which he had with me for to-morrow morning. This looks serious. The girl is evidently bold enough to make a fight of it for the position of Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose, and she has found out some way of getting her mother to help her. Don't suppose I am in the least nervous or discouraged; and don't do anything till you hear from me again. Only get back to London — for I may have serious need of your assistance in the course of the next day or two.

"I send this letter to town (to save a post) by the mid-day train, in charge of the guard. As you insist on knowing every step I take at Thorpe-Ambrose, I may as well tell you that my messenger (for I can't go to the station myself) is that curious old creature whom I mentioned to you in my first letter. Ever since that time, he has been perpetually hanging about here for a look at me. I am not sure whether I frighten him or fascinate him — perhaps I do both together. All you need care to know is, that I can trust him with my trifling errands, and possibly, as time goes on, with something more.

L. G."

Meanwhile the train had started from the Thorpe-Ambrose station, and the squire and his travelling companion were on their way to London.

Some men, finding themselves in Allan's company under present circumstances, might have felt curious to know the nature of his business in the metropolis. Young Pedgift's unerring instinct as a man of the world penetrated the secret without the slightest difficulty. "The old story," thought this wary old head, wagging privately on its lusty young shoulders. "There's a woman in the case, as usual. Any other business would have been turned over to *me*." Perfectly satisfied with this conclusion, Mr. Pedgift the younger proceeded, with an eye to his professional interest, to make himself agreeable to his client in the capacity of volunteer courier. He seized on the whole administrative business of the journey to London, as he had seized on the whole administrative business of the picnic at the Broads. On reaching the terminus, Allan was ready to go to any hotel that might be recommended. His invaluable solicitor straightway drove him to an hotel at which the Pedgift family had been accustomed to put up for three generations.

"You don't object to vegetables, sir?" said the cheerful Pedgift, as the cab stopped at an hotel in Covent Garden Market. "Very good, you may leave the rest to my grandfather, my father, and me. I don't know which of the three is most beloved and respected in this house. How-d'ye-do, William? (Our head-waiter, Mr. Armadale.) Is your wife's rheumatism better, and does the little boy get on nicely at school? Your master's out, is he? Never mind, you'll do. This, William, is Mr Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose. I have

prevailed on Mr. Armadale to try our house. Have you got the bed-room I wrote for? Very good. Let Mr. Armadale have it, instead of me (my grandfather's favourite bedroom, sir; number five, on the second floor;) pray take it — I can sleep anywhere. Will you have the mattress on the top of the feather-bed? You hear, William? Tell Matilda, the mattress on the top of the feather-bed. How is Matilda? Has she got the tooth-ache, as usual? The head-chambermaid, Mr. Armadale, and a most extraordinary woman; she will *not* part with a hollow tooth in her lower jaw. My grandfather says, 'have it out' — my father says, 'have it out,' — I say, 'have it out,' and Matilda turns a deaf ear to all three of us. Yes, William, yes; if Mr. Armadale approves, this sitting-room will do. About dinner, sir? You would prefer getting your business over first, and coming back to dinner? Shall we say, in that case, half-past seven? William, half-past seven. Not the least need to order anything, Mr. Armadale. The head-waiter has only to give my compliments to the cook, and the best dinner in London will be sent up, punctual to the minute, as a necessary consequence. Say Mr. Pedgift Junior, if you please, William — otherwise, sir, we might get my grandfather's dinner or my father's dinner, and they *might* turn out a little too heavy and old-fashioned in their way of feeding for you and me. As to the wine, William. At dinner, *my* champagne, and the sherry that my father thinks nasty. After dinner, the claret with the blue seal — the wine my innocent grandfather said wasn't worth sixpence a bottle. Ha! ha! poor old boy! You will send up the evening papers and the playbills, just as usual, and — that will do, I think, William, for the

present. An invaluable servant, Mr. Armadale; they're all invaluable servants in this house. We may not be fashionable here, sir, but by the Lord Harry we are snug! A cab? you would like a cab? Don't stir! I've rung the bell twice — that means, Cab wanted in a hurry. Might I ask, Mr. Armadale, which way your business takes you? Towards Bayswater? Would you mind dropping me in the park? It's a habit of mine when I'm in London to air myself among the aristocracy. Yours truly, sir, has an eye for a fine woman and a fine horse; and when he's in Hyde Park he's quite in his native element." Thus the all-accomplished Pedgift ran on; and by these little arts did he recommend himself to the good opinion of his client.

When the dinner-hour united the travelling companions again in their sitting-room at the hotel, a far less acute observer than young Pedgift must have noticed the marked change that appeared in Allan's manner. He looked vexed and puzzled, and sat drumming with his fingers on the dining-table without uttering a word.

"I'm afraid something has happened to annoy you, sir, since we parted company in the Park?" said Pedgift Junior. "Excuse the question — I only ask it in case I can be of any use."

"Something that I never expected has happened," returned Allan; "I don't know what to make of it. I should like to have your opinion," he added, after a little hesitation; "that is to say, if you will excuse my not entering into any particulars?"

"Certainly!" assented young Pedgift. "Sketch it in outline, sir. The merest hint will do; I wasn't born

yesterday. (Oh, these women!" thought the youthful philosopher, in parenthesis.)

"Well," began Allan, "you know what I said when we got to this hotel; I said I had a place to go to in Bayswater" (Pedgift mentally checked off the first point — Case in the suburbs, Bayswater) "and a person — that is to say — no — as I said before, a person to inquire after." (Pedgift checked off the next point: — Person in the case. She-person, or he-person? She-person unquestionably!) "Well, I went to the house, and when I asked for her — I mean the person — she — that is to say, the person — oh, confound it!" cried Allan, "I shall drive myself mad, and you too, if I try to tell my story in this roundabout way. Here it is in two words. I went to number eighteen Kingsdown Crescent, to see a lady named Mandeville; and when I asked for her, the servant said Mrs. Mandeville had gone away, without telling anybody where, and without even leaving an address at which letters could be sent to her. There! it's out at last, and what do you think of it now?"

"Tell me first, sir," said the wary Pedgift, "what inquiries you made when you found this lady had vanished?"

"Inquiries?" repeated Allan, "I was utterly staggered; I didn't say anything. What inquiries ought I to have made?"

Pedgift Junior cleared his throat, and crossed his legs in a strictly professional manner.

"I have no wish, Mr. Armadale," he began, "to inquire into your business with Mrs. Mandeville —"

"No," interposed Allan, bluntly, "I hope you won't

inquire into that. My business with Mrs. Mandeville must remain a secret."

"But," pursued Pedgift, laying down the law with the forefinger of one hand on the outstretched palm of the other, "I may, perhaps, be allowed to ask generally, whether your business with Mrs. Mandeville is of a nature to interest you in tracing her from Kingsdown Crescent to her present residence?"

"Certainly!" said Allan. "I have a very particular reason for wishing to see her."

"In that case, sir," returned Pedgift Junior, "there were two obvious questions which you ought to have asked, to begin with — namely, on what date Mrs. Mandeville left, and how she left. Having discovered this, you should have ascertained next, under what domestic circumstances she went away — whether there was a misunderstanding with anybody; say a difficulty about money-matters. Also, whether she went away alone, or with somebody else. Also, whether the house was her own, or whether she only lodged in it. Also, in the latter event —"

"Stop! stop! you're making my head swim," cried Allan. "I don't understand all these ins and outs — — I'm not used to this sort of thing."

"I've been used to it myself from my childhood upwards, sir," remarked Pedgift. "And if I can be of any assistance, say the word."

"You're very kind," returned Allan. "If you could only help me to find Mrs. Mandeville; and if you wouldn't mind leaving the thing afterwards entirely in my hands —?"

"I'll leave it in your hands, sir, with all the pleasure

in life," said Pedgift Junior. ("And I'll lay five to one," he added mentally, "when the time comes, you'll leave it in mine!) We'll go to Bayswater together, Mr. Armadale, to-morrow morning. In the meantime here's the soup. The case now before the court is — Pleasure *versus* Business. I don't know what you say, sir; I say, without a moment's hesitation, Verdict for the plaintiff. Let us gather our rosebuds while we may. Excuse my high spirits, Mr. Armadale. Though buried in the country, I was made for a London life; the very air of the metropolis intoxicates me." With that avowal the irresistible Pedgift placed a chair for his patron, and issued his orders cheerfully to his viceroy, the head-waiter. "Iced punch, William, after the soup. I answer for the punch, Mr. Armadale — it's made after a receipt of my great-uncle's. He kept a tavern, and founded the fortunes of the family. I don't mind telling you the Pedgifts have had a publican among them; there's no false pride about me. 'Worth makes the man (as Pope says), and want of it the fellow; the rest is all but leather and prunella.' I cultivate poetry as well as music, sir, in my leisure hours; in fact, I'm more or less on familiar terms with the whole of the nine Muses. Aha! here's the punch! The memory of my great-uncle, the publican, Mr. Armadale — drunk in solemn silence!"

Allan tried hard to emulate his companion's gaiety and good-humour, but with very indifferent success. His visit to Kingsdown Crescent recurred ominously again and again to his memory all through the dinner, and all through the public amusements to which he and his legal adviser repaired at a later hour of the evening. When Pedgift Junior put out his candle that

night, he shook his wary head, and regretfully apostrophized "the women" for the second time.

By ten o'clock the next morning, the indefatigable Pedgift was on the scene of action. To Allan's great relief, he proposed making the necessary inquiries at Kingsdown Crescent, in his own person, while his patron waited near at hand, in the cab which had brought them from the hotel. After a delay of little more than five minutes, he re-appeared, in full possession of all attainable particulars. His first proceeding was to request Allan to step out of the cab, and to pay the driver. Next, he politely offered his arm, and led the way round the corner of the crescent, across a square, and into a by-street, which was rendered exceptionally lively by the presence of the local cab-stand. Here he stopped, and asked jocosely, whether Mr. Armadale saw his way now, or whether it would be necessary to test his patience by making an explanation.

"See my way?" repeated Allan in bewilderment. "I see nothing but a cab-stand."

Pedgift Junior smiled compassionately, and entered on his explanation. It was a lodging-house at Kingsdown Crescent, he begged to state to begin with. He had insisted on seeing the landlady. A very nice person, with all the remains of having been a fine girl about fifty years ago; quite in Pedgift's style — if he had only been alive at the beginning of the present century — quite in Pedgift's style. But perhaps Mr. Armadale would prefer hearing about Mrs. Mandeville? Unfortunately, there was nothing to tell. There had been no quarrelling, and not a farthing left unpaid: the lodger had gone, and there wasn't an explanatory

circumstance to lay hold of anywhere. It was either Mrs. Mandeville's way to vanish, or there was something under the rose, quite undiscoverable so far. Pedgift had got the date on which she left, and the time of day at which she left, and the means by which she left. The means might help to trace her. She had gone away in a cab which the servant had fetched from the nearest stand. The stand was now before their eyes; and the waterman was the first person to apply to — going to the waterman for information, being clearly (if Mr. Armadale would excuse the joke) going to the fountain-head. Treating the subject in this airy manner, and telling Allan that he would be back in a moment, Pedgift Junior sauntered down the street, and beckoned the waterman confidentially into the nearest public-house.

In a little while the two reappeared; the waterman taking Pedgift in succession to the first, third, fourth, and sixth of the cabmen whose vehicles were on the stand. The longest conference was held with the sixth man; and it ended in the sudden approach of the sixth cab to the part of the street where Allan was waiting.

"Get in, sir," said Pedgift, opening the door, "I've found the man. He remembers the lady; and, though he has forgotten the name of the street, he believes he can find the place he drove her to when he once gets back into the neighbourhood. I am charmed to inform you, Mr. Armadale, that we are in luck's way so far. I asked the waterman to show me the regular men on the stand — and it turns out that one of the regular men drove Mrs. Mandeville. The waterman vouches for him; he's quite an anomaly — a respectable cabman; drives his own horse, and has never been in any trouble.

These are the sort of men, sir, who sustain one's belief in human nature. I've had a look at our friend; and I agree with the waterman — I think we can depend on him."

The investigation required some exercise of patience at the outset. It was not till the cab had traversed the distance between Bayswater and Pimlico, that the driver began to slacken his pace and look about him. After once or twice retracing its course, the vehicle entered a quiet by-street, ending in a dead wall, with a door in it; and stopped at the last house on the left-hand side, the house next to the wall.

"Here it is, gentlemen," said the man, opening the cab-door.

Allan and Allan's adviser both got out, and both looked at the house, with the same feeling of instinctive distrust.

Buildings have their physiognomy — especially buildings in great cities — and the face of this house was essentially furtive in its expression. The front windows were all shut, and the front blinds were all drawn down. It looked no larger than the other houses in the street, seen in front; but it ran back deceitfully, and gained its greater accommodation by means of its greater depth. It affected to be a shop on the ground-floor — but it exhibited absolutely nothing in the space that intervened between the window and an inner row of red curtains, which hid the interior entirely from view. At one side was the shop-door, having more red curtains behind the glazed part of it, inscribed with the name of "Oldershaw." On the other side was the private door, with a bell marked Professional; and another brass plate, indicating a medical occupant

on this side of the house, for the name on it was, "Doctor Downward." If ever brick and mortar spoke yet, the brick and mortar here said plainly, "We have got our secrets inside, and we mean to keep them."

"This can't be the place," said Allan; "there must be some mistake."

"You know best, sir," remarked Pedgift Junior, with his sardonic gravity. "You know Mrs. Mandeville's habits."

"I!" exclaimed Allan. "You may be surprised to hear it — but Mrs. Mandeville is a total stranger to me."

"I'm not in the least surprised to hear it, sir — the landlady at Kingsdown Crescent informed me that Mrs. Mandeville was an old woman. Suppose we inquire?" added the impenetrable Pedgift, looking at the red curtains in the shop-window with a strong suspicion that Mrs. Mandeville's granddaughter might possibly be behind them.

They tried the shop-door first. It was locked. They rang. A lean and yellow young woman, with a tattered French novel in her hand, opened it.

"Good morning, miss," said Pedgift. "Is Mrs. Mandeville at home?"

The yellow young woman stared at him in astonishment. "No person of that name is known here," she answered sharply, in a foreign accent.

"Perhaps they know her at the private door?" suggested Pedgift Junior.

"Perhaps they do," said the yellow young woman, and shut the door in his face.

"Rather a quick-tempered young person that, sir," said Pedgift. "I congratulate Mrs. Mandeville on not being acquainted with her." He led the way, as he

spoke, to Doctor Downward's side of the premises, and rang the bell.

The door was opened this time by a man in a shabby livery. He, too, stared when Mrs. Mandeville's name was mentioned; and he, too, knew of no such person in the house.

"Very odd," said Pedgift, appealing to Allan.

"What is odd?" asked a softly-stepping, softly-speaking gentleman in black, suddenly appearing on the threshold of the parlour-door.

Pedgift Junior politely explained the circumstances, and begged to know whether he had the pleasure of speaking to Doctor Downward.

The doctor bowed. If the expression may be pardoned, he was one of those carefully-constructed physicians, in whom the public — especially the female public — implicitly trust. He had the necessary bald head, the necessary double eyeglass, the necessary black clothes, and the necessary blandness of manner, all complete. His voice was soothing, his ways were deliberate, his smile was confidential. What particular branch of his profession Doctor Downward followed, was not indicated on his door-plate — but he had utterly mistaken his vocation, if he was not a ladies' medical man.

"Are you quite sure there is no mistake about the name?" asked the doctor, with a strong underlying anxiety in his manner. "I have known very serious inconvenience to arise sometimes from mistakes about names. No? There is really no mistake? In that case, gentlemen, I can only repeat what my servant has already told you. Don't apologize, pray. Good morning." The doctor withdrew as noiselessly as he

had appeared; the man in the shabby livery silently opened the door; and Allan and his companion found themselves in the street again.

"Mr. Armadale," said Pedgift, "I don't know how you feel — I feel puzzled."

"That's awkward," returned Allan; "I was just going to ask you what we ought to do next."

"I don't like the look of the place, the look of the shopwoman, or the look of the doctor," pursued the other. "And yet I can't say I think they are deceiving us — I can't say I think they really do know Mrs. Mandeville's name."

The impressions of Pedgift Junior seldom misled him; and they had not misled him in this case. The caution which had dictated Mrs. Oldershaw's private removal from Bayswater, was the caution which frequently overreaches itself. It had warned her to trust nobody at Pimlico with the secret of the name she had assumed as Miss Gwilt's reference; but it had entirely failed to prepare her for the emergency that had really happened. In a word, Mrs. Oldershaw had provided for everything, except for the one unimaginable contingency of an after-inquiry into the character of Miss Gwilt.

"We must do something," said Allan; "it seems useless to stop here."

Nobody had ever yet caught Pedgift Junior at the end of his resources; and Allan failed to catch him at the end of them now. "I quite agree with you, sir," he said; "we must do something. We'll cross-examine the cabman."

The cabman proved to be immovable. Charged with mistaking the place, he pointed to the empty

shop-window. "I don't know what you may have seen, gentlemen," he remarked; "but there's the only shop-window I ever saw with nothing at all inside it. *That* fixed the place in my mind at the time, and I know it again when I see it." Charged with mistaking the person, or the day, or the house at which he had taken the person up, the cabman proved to be still unassailable. The servant who fetched him was marked as a girl well known on the stand. The day was marked, as the unluckiest working day he had had since the first of the year; and the lady was marked, as having had her money ready at the right moment (which not one elderly lady in a hundred usually had), and having paid him his fare on demand without disputing it (which not one elderly lady in a hundred usually did). "Take my number, gentlemen," concluded the cabman, "and pay me for my time; and what I've said to you, I'll swear to anywhere."

Pedgift made a note in his pocket-book of the man's number. Having added to it the name of the street, and the names on the two brass plates, he quietly opened the cab-door. "We are quite in the dark, thus far," he said. "Suppose we grope our way back to the hotel?"

He spoke and looked more seriously than usual. The mere fact of "Mrs. Mandeville's" having changed her lodging without telling any one where she was going, and without leaving any address at which letters could be forwarded to her — which the jealous malignity of Mrs. Milroy had interpreted as being undeniably suspicious in itself — had produced no great impression on the more impartial judgment of Allan's solicitor. People frequently left their lodgings in a private

manner, with perfectly producible reasons for doing so. But the appearance of the place to which the cabman persisted in declaring that he had driven "Mrs. Mandeville," set the character and proceedings of that mysterious lady before Pedgift Junior in a new light. His personal interest in the inquiry suddenly strengthened, and he began to feel a curiosity to know the real nature of Allan's business which he had not felt yet.

"Our next move, Mr. Armadale, is not a very easy move to see," he said, as they drove back to the hotel. "Do you think you could put me in possession of any further particulars?"

Allan hesitated; and Pedgift Junior saw that he had advanced a little too far. "I mustn't force it," he thought; "I must give it time, and let it come of its own accord." "In the absence of any other information, sir," he resumed, "what do you say to my making some inquiry about that queer shop, and about those two names on the door-plate? My business in London, when I leave you, is of a professional nature; and I am going into the right quarter for getting information, if it is to be got."

"There can't be any harm, I suppose, in making inquiries," replied Allan.

He, too, spoke more seriously than usual; he, too, was beginning to feel an all-mastering curiosity to know more. Some vague connection, not to be distinctly realized or traced out, began to establish itself in his mind between the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's family circumstances, and the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's reference. "I'll get down and walk, and leave you to go on to your business,"

he said. "I want to consider a little about this; and a walk and a cigar will help me."

"My business will be done, sir, between one and two," said Pedgift, when the cab had been stopped, and Allan had got out. "Shall we meet again at two o'clock, at the hotel?"

Allan nodded, and the cab drove off.

CHAPTER IV.

Allan at Bay.

Two o'clock came; and Pedgift Junior, punctual to his time, came with it. His vivacity of the morning had all sparkled out; he greeted Allan with his customary politeness, but without his customary smile; and when the head-waiter came in for orders, his dismissal was instantly pronounced in words never yet heard to issue from the lips of Pedgift in that hotel: — "Nothing at present."

"You seem to be in low spirits," said Allan. "Can't we get our information? Can nobody tell you anything about the house in Pimlico?"

"Three different people have told me about it, Mr. Armadale; and they have all three said the same thing."

Allan eagerly drew his chair nearer to the place occupied by his travelling companion. His reflections in the interval since they had last seen each other, had not tended to compose him. That strange connection, so easy to feel, so hard to trace, between the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's family circumstances, and the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's

reference, which had already established itself in his thoughts, had by this time stealthily taken a firmer and firmer hold on his mind. Doubts troubled him which he could neither understand nor express. Curiosity filled him, which he half-longed and half-dreaded to satisfy.

"I am afraid I must trouble you with a question or two, sir, before I can come to the point," said Pedgift Junior. "I don't want to force myself into your confidence; I only want to see my way, in what looks to me like a very awkward business. Do you mind telling me whether others beside yourself are interested in this inquiry of ours?"

"Other people *are* interested in it," replied Allan. "There's no objection to telling you that."

"Is there any other person who is the object of the inquiry besides Mrs. Mandeville herself?" pursued Pedgift, winding his way a little deeper into the secret.

"Yes; there is another person," said Allan, answering rather unwillingly.

"Is the person a young woman, Mr. Armadale?"

Allan started. "How do you come to guess that?" he began — then checked himself, when it was too late. "Don't ask me any more questions," he resumed. "I'm a bad hand at defending myself against a sharp fellow like you; and I'm bound in honour towards other people to keep the particulars of this business to myself."

Pedgift Junior had apparently heard enough for his purpose. He drew his chair, in his turn, nearer to Allan. He was evidently anxious and embarrassed —

but his professional manner began to show itself again from sheer force of habit.

"I've done with my questions, sir," he said; "and I have something to say now, on my side. In my father's absence, perhaps you may be kindly disposed to consider me as your legal adviser. If you will take my advice, you will not stir another step in this inquiry."

"What do you mean?" interposed Allan.

"It is just possible, Mr. Armadale, that the cabman, positive as he is, may have been mistaken. I strongly recommend you to take it for granted that he *is* mistaken — and to drop it there."

The caution was kindly intended; but it came too late. Allan did what ninety-nine men out of a hundred in his position would have done — he declined to take his lawyer's advice.

"Very well, sir," said Pedgift Junior; "if you will have it, you must have it."

He leaned forward close to Allan's ear, and whispered what he had heard of the house in Pimlico, and of the people who occupied it.

"Don't blame me, Mr. Armadale," he added, when the irrevocable words had been spoken. "I tried to spare you."

Allan suffered the shock, as all great shocks are suffered, in silence. His first impulse would have driven him headlong for refuge to that very view of the cabman's assertion which had just been recommended to him, but for one damning circumstance which placed itself inexorably in his way. Miss Gwilt's marked reluctance to approach the story of her past life, rose irrepressibly on his memory, in indirect but horrible

confirmation of the evidence which connected Miss Gwilt's reference with the house in Pimlico. One conclusion, and one only — the conclusion which any man must have drawn, hearing what he had just heard, and knowing no more than he knew — forced itself into his mind. A miserable, fallen woman, who had abandoned herself in her extremity to the help of wretches skilled in criminal concealment — who had stolen her way back to decent society and a reputable employment, by means of a false character — and whose position now imposed on her the dreadful necessity of perpetual secrecy and perpetual deceit in relation to her past life — such was the aspect in which the beautiful governess at Thorpe-Ambrose now stood revealed to Allan's eyes!

Falsely revealed, or truly revealed? Had she stolen her way back to decent society, and a reputable employment, by means of a false character? She had. Did her position impose on her the dreadful necessity of perpetual secrecy and perpetual deceit, in relation to her past life? It did. Was she some such pitiable victim to the treachery of a man unknown as Allan had supposed? *She was no such pitiable victim.* The conclusion which Allan had drawn — the conclusion literally forced into his mind by the facts before him — was, nevertheless, the conclusion of all others that was farthest even from touching on the truth. The true story of Miss Gwilt's connection with the house in Pimlico and the people who inhabited it — a house rightly described as filled with wicked secrets, and people rightly represented as perpetually in danger of feeling the grasp of the law — was a story which coming events were yet to disclose: a story infinitely

less revolting, and yet infinitely more terrible, than Allan or Allan's companion had either of them supposed.

"I tried to spare you, Mr. Armadale," repeated Pedgift. "I was anxious, if I could possibly avoid it, not to distress you."

Allan looked up, and made an effort to control himself. "You have distressed me dreadfully," he said "You have quite crushed me down. But it is not your fault. I ought to feel you have done me a service — and what I ought to do I will do, when I am my own man again. There is one thing," Allan added, after a moment's painful consideration, "which ought to be understood between us at once. The advice you offered me just now was very kindly meant, and it was the best advice that could be given. I will take it gratefully. We will never talk of this again, if you please; and I beg and entreat you will never speak about it to any other person. Will you promise me that?"

Pedgift gave the promise with very evident sincerity, but without his professional confidence of manner. The distress in Allan's face seemed to daunt him. After a moment of very uncharacteristic hesitation, he considerately quitted the room.

Left by himself, Allan rang for writing materials, and took out of his pocket-book the fatal letter of introduction to "Mrs. Mandeville," which he had received from the major's wife.

A man accustomed to consider consequences and to prepare himself for action by previous thought would, in Allan's present circumstances, have felt some difficulty as to the course which it might now be least embarrassing and least dangerous to pursue. Accustomed

to let his impulses direct him on all other occasions, Allan acted on impulse in the serious emergency that now confronted him. Though his attachment to Miss Gwilt was nothing like the deeply-rooted feeling which he had himself honestly believed it to be, she had taken no common place in his admiration, and she filled him with no common grief when he thought of her now. His one dominant desire, at that critical moment in his life, was a man's merciful desire to protect from exposure and ruin the unhappy woman who had lost her place in his estimation, without losing her claim to the forbearance that could spare and to the compassion that could shield her. "I can't go back to Thorpe-Ambrose; I can't trust myself to speak to her, or to see her again. But I can keep her miserable secret — and I will!" With that thought in his heart, Allan set himself to perform the first and foremost duty which now claimed him — the duty of communicating with Mrs. Milroy. If he had possessed a higher mental capacity and a clearer mental view, he might have found the letter no easy one to write. As it was, he calculated no consequences, and felt no difficulty. His instinct warned him to withdraw at once from the position in which he now stood towards the major's wife, and he wrote what his instinct counselled him to write under those circumstances, as rapidly as the pen could travel over the paper: —

"Dunn's Hotel, Covent Garden, Tuesday.

"Dear Madam, — Pray excuse my not returning to Thorpe-Ambrose to-day, as I said I would. Unforeseen circumstances oblige me to stop in London. I am sorry to say I have not succeeded in seeing Mrs.

Mandeville, for which reason I cannot perform your errand; and I beg, therefore, with many apologies, to return the letter of introduction. I hope you will allow me to conclude by saying that I am very much obliged to you for your kindness, and that I will not venture to trespass on it any further.

"I remain, dear madam, yours truly,

"ALLAN ARMADALE."

In those artless words, still entirely unsuspicious of the character of the woman he had to deal with, Allan put the weapon she wanted into Mrs. Milroy's hands.

The letter and its enclosure once sealed up, and addressed, he was free to think of himself and his future. As he sat idly drawing lines with his pen on the blotting-paper, the tears came into his eyes for the first time — tears in which the woman who had deceived him had no share. His heart had gone back to his dead mother. "If she had been alive," he thought, "I might have trusted *her*, and she would have comforted me." It was useless to dwell on it — he dashed away the tears, and turned his thoughts with the heart-sick resignation that we all know, to living and present things.

He wrote a line to Mr. Bashwood, briefly informing the deputy-steward that his absence from Thorpe-Ambrose was likely to be prolonged for some little time, and that any further instructions which might be necessary, under those circumstances, would reach him through Mr. Pedgift the elder. This done, and the letters sent to the post, his thoughts were forced back once more on himself. Again the blank future waited

before him to be filled up; and again his heart shrank from it to the refuge of the past.

This time, other images than the image of his mother filled his mind. The one all-absorbing interest of his earlier days stirred living and eager in him again. He thought of the sea; he thought of his yacht lying idle in the fishing harbour at his west-country home. The old longing got possession of him to hear the wash of the waves; to see the filling of the sails; to feel the vessel that his own hands had helped to build, bounding under him once more. He rose in his impetuous way, to call for the time-table, and to start for Somersetshire by the first train —; when the dread of the questions which Mr. Brock might ask, the suspicion of the change which Mr. Brock might see in him, drew him back to his chair. "I'll write," he thought, "to have the yacht rigged and refitted, and I'll wait to go to Somersetshire myself till Midwinter can go with me." He sighed as his memory reverted to his absent friend. Never had he felt the void made in his life by Midwinter's departure so painfully as he felt it now, in the dreariest of all social solitudes — the solitude of a stranger in London, left by himself at an hotel.

Before long, Pedgift Junior looked in, with an apology for his intrusion. Allan felt too lonely and too friendless not to welcome his companion's reappearance gratefully. "I'm not going back to Thorpe-Ambrose," he said: "I'm going to stay a little while in London. I hope you will be able to stay with me?" To do him justice, Pedgift was touched by the solitary position in which the owner of the great Thorpe-Ambrose estate now appeared before him. He had never,

in his relations with Allan, so entirely forgotten his business-interests as he forgot them now.

"You are quite right, sir, to stop here — London's the place to divert your mind," said Pedgift cheerfully. "All business is more or less elastic in its nature, Mr. Armadale; I'll spin *my* business out, and keep you company with the greatest pleasure. We are both of us on the right side of thirty, sir — let's enjoy ourselves. What do you say to dining early, and going to the play, and trying the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park to-morrow morning, after breakfast? If we only live like fighting-cocks, and go in perpetually for public amusements, we shall arrive in no time at the *mens sana in corpore sano* of the ancients. Don't be alarmed at the quotation, sir. I dabble a little in Latin after business hours, and enlarge my sympathies by occasional perusal of the Pagan writers, assisted by a crib. William, dinner at five; and, as it's particularly important to-day, I'll see the cook myself."

The evening passed — the next day passed — Thursday morning came, and brought with it a letter for Allan. The direction was in Mrs. Milroy's handwriting; and the form of address adopted in the letter warned Allan the moment he opened it that something had gone wrong.

["Private."] "The Cottage, Thorpe-Ambrose, Wednesday.

"Sir, — I have just received your mysterious letter. It has more than surprised, it has really alarmed me. After having made the friendliest advances to you on my side, I find myself suddenly shut out from your confidence in the most unintelligible, and, I must add, the most discourteous manner. It is quite impos-

sible that I can allow the matter to rest where you have left it. The only conclusion I can draw from your letter is, that my confidence must have been abused in some way, and that you know a great deal more than you are willing to tell me. Speaking in the interest of my daughter's welfare, I request that you will inform me what the circumstances are which have prevented your seeing Mrs. Mandeville, and which have led to the withdrawal of the assistance that you unconditionally promised me in your letter of Monday last.

"In my state of health, I cannot involve myself in a lengthened correspondence. I must endeavour to anticipate any objections you may make, and I must say all that I have to say in my present letter. In the event (which I am most unwilling to consider possible) of your declining to accede to the request that I have just addressed to you, I beg to say that I shall consider it my duty to my daughter to have this very unpleasant matter cleared up. If I don't hear from you to my full satisfaction by return of post, I shall be obliged to tell my husband that circumstances have happened which justify us in immediately testing the respectability of Miss Gwilt's reference. And when he asks me for my authority, I will refer him to you.

"Your obedient servant,

"Anne Milroy."

In those terms the major's wife threw off the mask, and left her victim to survey at his leisure the trap in which she had caught him. Allan's belief in Mrs. Milroy's good faith had been so implicitly sincere, that her letter simply bewildered him. He saw vaguely,

that he had been deceived in some way, and that Mrs. Milroy's neighbourly interest in him was not what it had looked on the surface; and he saw no more. The threat of appealing to the major — on which, with a woman's ignorance of the natures of men, Mrs. Milroy had relied for producing its effect — was the only part of the letter to which Allan reverted with any satisfaction: it relieved instead of alarming him. "If there *is* to be a quarrel," he thought, "it will be a comfort, at any rate, to have it out with a man."

Firm in his resolution to shield the unhappy woman whose secret he wrongly believed himself to have surprised, Allan sat down to write his apologies to the major's wife. After setting up three polite declarations, in close marching order, he retired from the field. "He was extremely sorry to have offended Mrs. Milroy. He was innocent of all intention to offend Mrs. Milroy. And he begged to remain Mrs. Milroy's truly." Never had Allan's habitual brevity as a letter-writer done him better service than it did him now. With a little more skilfulness in the use of his pen, he might have given his enemy even a stronger hold on him than the hold she had got already.

The interval-day passed, and with the next morning's post Mrs. Milroy's threat came realized in the shape of a letter from her husband. The major wrote less formally than his wife had written, but his questions were mercilessly to the point.

"The Cottage, Thorpe-Ambrose,
["Private."] "Friday, July 11th, 1851.

"Dear Sir, — When you did me the favour of calling here a few days since, you asked a question

relating to my governess, Miss Gwilt, which I thought rather a strange one at the time, and which caused, as you may remember, a momentary embarrassment between us.

"This morning, the subject of Miss Gwilt has been brought to my notice again in a manner which has caused me the utmost astonishment. In plain words, Mrs. Milroy has informed me that Miss Gwilt has exposed herself to the suspicion of having deceived us by a false reference. On my expressing the surprise which such an extraordinary statement caused me, and requesting that it might be instantly substantiated, I was still further astonished by being told to apply for all particulars to no less a person than Mr. Armadale. I have vainly requested some further explanation from Mrs. Milroy; she persists in maintaining silence, and in referring me to yourself.

"Under these extraordinary circumstances, I am compelled, in justice to all parties, to ask you certain questions, which I will endeavour to put as plainly as possible, and which I am quite ready to believe (from my previous experience of you) that you will answer frankly on your side.

"I beg to inquire in the first place, whether you admit or deny Mrs. Milroy's assertion that you have made yourself acquainted with particulars relating either to Miss Gwilt or to Miss Gwilt's reference, of which I am entirely ignorant? In the second place, if you admit the truth of Mrs. Milroy's statement, I request to know how you became acquainted with those particulars? Thirdly, and lastly, I beg to ask you what the particulars are?

"If any special justification for putting these ques-

tions be needed — which, purely as a matter of courtesy towards yourself, I am willing to admit — I beg to remind you that the most precious charge in my house, the charge of my daughter, is confided to Miss Gwilt; and that Mrs. Milroy's statement places you, to all appearance, in the position of being competent to tell me whether that charge is properly bestowed or not.

"I have only to add that, as nothing has thus far occurred to justify me in entertaining the slightest suspicion either of my governess or her reference, I shall wait before I make any appeal to Miss Gwilt until I have received your answer — which I shall expect by return of post.

"Believe me, dear sir, faithfully yours,

"DAVID MILROY."

This transparently straightforward letter at once dissipated the confusion which had thus far existed in Allan's mind: he saw the snare in which he had been caught (though he was still necessarily at a loss to understand why it had been set for him), as he had not seen it yet. Mrs. Milroy had clearly placed him between two alternatives — the alternative of putting himself in the wrong, by declining to answer her husband's questions; or the alternative of meanly sheltering his responsibility behind the responsibility of a woman, by acknowledging to the major's own face that the major's wife had deceived him. In this difficulty Allan acted as usual, without hesitation. His pledge to Mrs. Milroy to consider their correspondence private still bound him, disgracefully as she had abused it. And his resolution was as immovable as ever to let no earthly consideration tempt him into betraying

Miss Gwilt. "I may have behaved like a fool," he thought, "but I won't break my word; and I won't be the means of turning that miserable woman adrift in the world again."

He wrote to the major as artlessly and briefly as he had written to the major's wife. He declared his unwillingness to cause a friend and neighbour any disappointment, if he could possibly help it. On this occasion he had no other choice. The questions the major asked him were questions which he could not consent to answer. He was not very clever at explaining himself, and he hoped he might be excused for putting it in that way, and saying no more.

Monday's post brought with it Major Milroy's rejoinder, and closed the correspondence.

"The Cottage, Thorpe-Ambrose, Sunday.

"Sir, — Your refusal to answer my questions, unaccompanied as it is by even the shadow of an excuse for such a proceeding, can be interpreted but in one way. Besides being an implied acknowledgment of the correctness of Mrs. Milroy's statement, it is also an implied reflection on my governess's character. As an act of justice towards a lady who lives under the protection of my roof, and who has given me no reason whatever to distrust her, I shall now show our correspondence to Miss Gwilt: and I shall repeat to her the conversation which I had with Mrs. Milroy on the subject, in Mrs. Milroy's presence.

"One word more respecting the future relations between us, and I have done. My ideas on certain subjects are, I daresay, the ideas of an old-fashioned man. In my time, we had a code of honour by which we

regulated our actions. According to that code, if a man made private inquiries into a lady's affairs, without being either her husband, her father, or her brother, he subjected himself to the responsibility of justifying his conduct in the estimation of others; and if he evaded that responsibility, he abdicated the position of a gentleman. It is quite possible that this antiquated way of thinking exists no longer; but it is too late for me, at my time of life, to adopt more modern views. I am scrupulously anxious, seeing that we live in a country and a time in which the only court of honour is a police-court, to express myself with the utmost moderation of language upon this the last occasion that I shall have to communicate with you. Allow me, therefore, merely to remark, that our ideas of the conduct which is becoming in a gentleman, differ seriously; and permit me on this account to request that you will consider yourself for the future as a stranger to my family and to myself.

"Your obedient servant,

"David Milroy."

The Monday morning on which his client received the major's letter, was the blackest Monday that had yet been marked in Pedgift's calendar. When Allan's first angry sense of the tone of contempt in which his friend and neighbour pronounced sentence on him had subsided, it left him sunk in a state of depression from which no efforts made by his travelling companion could rouse him for the rest of the day. Reverting naturally, now that his sentence of banishment had been pronounced, to his early intercourse with the cottage, his memory went back to Neelie, more regret-

fully and more penitently than it had gone back to her yet. "If *she* had shut the door on me, instead of her father," was the bitter reflection with which Allan now reviewed the past, "I shouldn't have had a word to say against it; I should have felt it served me right."

The next day brought another letter — a welcome letter this time, from Mr. Brock. Allan had written to Somersetshire on the subject of refitting the yacht some days since. The letter had found the rector engaged, as he innocently supposed, in protecting his old pupil against the woman whom he had watched in London, and whom he now believed to have followed him back to his own home. Acting under the directions sent to her, Mrs. Oldershaw's housemaid had completed the mystification of Mr. Brock. She had tranquillized all further anxiety on the rector's part, by giving him a written undertaking (in the character of Miss Gwilt), engaging never to approach Mr. Armadale, either personally or by letter! Firmly persuaded that he had won the victory at last, poor Mr. Brock answered Allan's note in the highest spirits, expressing some natural surprise at his leaving Thorpe-Ambrose, but readily promising that the yacht should be refitted, and offering the hospitality of the rectory in the heartiest manner.

This letter did wonders in raising Allan's spirits. It gave him a new interest to look to, entirely disassociated from his past life in Norfolk. He began to count the days that were still to pass before the return of his absent friend. It was then Tuesday. If Midwinter came back from his walking-trip, as he had engaged to come back, in a fortnight, Saturday would find him at Thorpe-Ambrose. A note sent to meet the traveller

might bring him to London the same night; and, if all went well, before another week was over, they might be afloat together in the yacht.

The next day passed, to Allan's relief, without bringing any letters. The spirits of Pedgift rose sympathetically with the spirits of his client. Towards dinner-time he reverted to the *mens sana in corpore sano* of the ancients, and issued his orders to the head-waiter more royally than ever.

Thursday came, and brought the fatal postman with more news from Norfolk. A letter-writer now stepped on the scene who had not appeared there yet; and the total overthrow of all Allan's plans for a visit to Somersetshire was accomplished on the spot.

Pedgift Junior happened that morning to be first at the breakfast-table. When Allan came in, he relapsed into his professional manner, and offered a letter to his patron with a bow performed in dreary silence.

"For me?" inquired Allan, shrinking instinctively from a new correspondent.

"For you, sir — from my father," replied Pedgift, "enclosed in one to myself. Perhaps you will allow me to suggest, by way of preparing you for — for something a little unpleasant, — that we shall want a particularly good dinner to-day; — and (if they're not performing any modern German music to-night,) I think we should do well to finish the evening melodiously at the Opera."

"Something wrong at Thorpe-Ambrose?" asked Allan.

"Yes, Mr. Armadale; something wrong at Thorpe-Ambrose."

Allan sat down resignedly, and opened the letter.

"High Street, Thorpe-Ambrose,
["Private and confidential."] "17th July, 1851.

"DEAR SIR, — I cannot reconcile it with my sense of duty to your interests, to leave you any longer in ignorance of reports current in this town and its neighbourhood, which, I regret to say, are reports affecting yourself.

"The first intimation of anything unpleasant reached me on Monday last. It was widely rumoured in the town that something had gone wrong at Major Milroy's with the new governess, and that Mr. Armadale was mixed up in it. I paid no heed to this, believing it to be one of the many trumpery pieces of scandal perpetually set going here; and as necessary as the air they breathe, to the comfort of the inhabitants of this highly respectable place.

"Tuesday, however, put the matter in a new light. The most interesting particulars were circulated on the highest authority. On Wednesday, the gentry in the neighbourhood took the matter up, and universally sanctioned the view adopted by the town. To-day, the public feeling has reached its climax, and I find myself under the necessity of making you acquainted with what has happened.

"To begin at the beginning. It is asserted that a correspondence took place last week between Major Milroy and yourself; in which you cast a very serious suspicion on Miss Gwilt's respectability, without defining your accusation, and without (on being applied to) producing your proofs. Upon this, the major appears to have felt it his duty (while assuring his governess of his own firm belief in her respectability) to inform her of what had happened, in order that she might

have no future reason to complain of his having had any concealments from her in a matter affecting her character. Very magnanimous on the major's part; but you will see directly that Miss Gwilt was more magnanimous still. After expressing her thanks in a most becoming manner, she requested permission to withdraw herself from Major Milroy's service.

"Various reports are in circulation as to the governess's reason for taking this step.

"The authorized version (as sanctioned by the resident gentry) represents Miss Gwilt to have said that she could not condescend — in justice to herself, and in justice to her highly respectable reference — to defend her reputation against undefined imputations cast on it by a comparative stranger. At the same time it was impossible for her to pursue such a course of conduct as this, unless she possessed a freedom of action which was quite incompatible with her continuing to occupy the dependent position of a governess. For that reason she felt it incumbent on her to leave her situation. But while doing this, she was equally determined not to lead to any mis-interpretation of her motives, by leaving the neighbourhood. No matter at what inconvenience to herself, she would remain long enough at Thorpe-Ambrose to await any more definitely-expressed imputations that might be made on her character, and to repel them publicly the instant they assumed a tangible form.

"Such is the position which this high-minded lady has taken up, with an excellent effect on the public mind in these parts. It is clearly her interest, for some reason, to leave her situation, without leaving the neighbourhood. On Monday last she established her-

self in a cheap lodging on the outskirts of the town. And on the same day, she probably wrote to her reference, for yesterday there came a letter from that lady to Major Milroy, full of virtuous indignation, and courting the fullest inquiry. The letter has been shown publicly, and has immensely strengthened Miss Gwilt's position. She is now considered to be quite a heroine. The *Thorpe-Ambrose Mercury* has got a leading article about her, comparing her to Joan of Arc. It is considered probable that she will be referred to in the sermon next Sunday. We reckon five strong-minded single ladies in this neighbourhood — and all five have called on her. A testimonial was suggested; but it has been given up at Miss Gwilt's own request, and a general movement is now on foot to get her employment as a teacher of music. Lastly, I have had the honour of a visit from the lady herself, in her capacity of martyr, to tell me, in the sweetest manner, that she doesn't blame Mr. Armadale; and that she considers him to be an innocent instrument in the hands of other and more designing people. I was carefully on my guard with her; for I don't altogether believe in Miss Gwilt, and I have my lawyer's suspicions of the motive that is at the bottom of her present proceedings.

"I have written thus far, my dear sir, with little hesitation or embarrassment. But there is unfortunately a serious side to this business as well as a ridiculous side; and I must unwillingly come to it before I close my letter.

"It is, I think, quite impossible that you can permit yourself to be spoken of as you are spoken of now, without stirring personally in the matter. You have unluckily made many enemies here, and foremost

among them is my colleague, Mr. Darch. He has been showing everywhere a somewhat rashly-expressed letter you wrote to him, on the subject of letting the cottage to Major Milroy instead of to himself; and it has helped to exasperate the feeling against you. It is roundly stated in so many words, that you have been prying into Miss Gwilt's family affairs, with the most dishonourable motives; that you have tried, for a profligate purpose of your own, to damage her reputation, and to deprive her of the protection of Major Milroy's roof; and that, after having been asked to substantiate by proof the suspicions that you have cast on the reputation of a defenceless woman, you have maintained a silence which condemns you in the estimation of all honourable men.

"I hope it is quite unnecessary for me to say that I don't attach the smallest particle of credit to these infamous reports. But they are too widely spread and too widely believed to be treated with contempt. I strongly urge you to return at once to this place, and to take the necessary measures for defending your character, in concert with me, as your legal adviser. I have formed, since my interview with Miss Gwilt, a very strong opinion of my own on the subject of that lady, which it is not necessary to commit to paper. Suffice it to say here, that I shall have a means to propose to you for silencing the slanderous tongues of your neighbours, on the success of which I stake my professional reputation, if you will only back me by your presence and authority.

"It may, perhaps, help to show you the necessity there is for your return, if I mention one other assertion respecting yourself, which is in everybody's mouth.

Your absence is, I regret to tell you, attributed to the meanest of all motives. It is said that you are remaining in London because you are afraid to show your face at Thorpe-Ambrose.

"Believe me, dear sir, your faithful servant,

"A. PEDGIFT SEN^R."

Allan was of an age to feel the sting contained in the last sentence of his lawyer's letter. He started to his feet in a paroxysm of indignation, which revealed his character to Pedgift Junior in an entirely new light.

"Where's the time-table?" cried Allan. "I must go back to Thorpe-Ambrose by the next train! If it doesn't start directly, I'll have a special engine. I must and will go back instantly, and I don't care two straws for the expense!"

"Suppose we telegraph to my father, sir?" suggested the judicious Pedgift. "It's the quickest way of expressing your feelings, and the cheapest."

"So it is," said Allan. "Thank you for reminding me of it. Telegraph to them! Tell your father to give every man in Thorpe-Ambrose the lie direct, in my name. Put it in capital letters, Pedgift — put it in capital letters!"

Pedgift smiled and shook his head. If he was acquainted with no other variety of human nature, he thoroughly knew the variety that exists in country towns.

"It won't have the least effect on them, Mr. Armadale," he remarked quietly. "They'll only go on lying harder than ever. If you want to upset the whole town, one line will do it. With five shillingsworth of human labour and electric fluid, sir (I dabble a little

in science after business hours), we'll explode a bomb-shell in Thorpe-Ambrose!" He produced the bomb-shell on a slip of paper as he spoke: — "A. Pedgift Junior, to A. Pedgift Senior. — Spread it all over the place that Mr. Armadale is coming down by the next train."

"More words," suggested Allan, looking over his shoulder. "Make it stronger."

"Leave my father to make it stronger, sir," returned the wary Pedgift. "My father is on the spot — and his command of language is something quite extraordinary." He rang the bell, and despatched the telegram.

Now that something had been done, Allan subsided gradually into a state of composure. He looked back again at Mr. Pedgift's letter, and then handed it to Mr. Pedgift's son.

"Can you guess your father's plan for setting me right in the neighbourhood?" he asked.

Pedgift the younger shook his wise head. "His plan appears to be connected in some way, sir, with his opinion of Miss Gwilt."

"I wonder what he thinks of her?" said Allan.

"I shouldn't be surprised, Mr. Armadale," returned Pedgrift Junior, "if his opinion staggers you a little, when you come to hear it. My father has had a large legal experience of the shady side of the sex — and he learnt his profession at the Old Bailey."

Allan made no further inquiries. He seemed to shrink from pursuing the subject, after having started it himself. "Let's be doing something to kill the time," he said. "Let's pack up and pay the bill."

They packed up, and paid the bill. The hour came, and the train left for Norfolk at last.

While the travellers were on their way back, a somewhat longer telegraphic message than Allan's was flashing its way past them along the wires in the reverse direction — from Thorpe-Ambrose to London. The message was in cypher, and the signs being interpreted, it ran thus: — "From Lydia Gwilt to Maria Oldershaw — Good news! He is coming back. I mean to have an interview with him. Everything looks well. Now I have left the cottage, I have no women's prying eyes to dread, and I can come and go as I please. Mr. Midwinter is luckily out of the way. I don't despair of becoming Mrs. Armadale yet. Whatever happens, depend on my keeping away from London, until I am certain of not taking any spies after me to your place. I am in no hurry to leave Thorpe-Ambrose. I mean to be even with Miss Milroy first."

Shortly after that message was received in London, Allan was back again in his own house. It was evening — Pedgrift Junior had just left him — and Pedgrift Senior was expected to call on business in half an hour's time.

CHAPTER V.

Pedgift's Remedy.

After waiting to hold a preliminary consultation with his son, Mr. Pedgrift the elder set forth alone for his interview with Allan at the great house.

Allowing for the difference in their ages, the son

was, in this instance, so accurately the reflection of the father, that an acquaintance with either of the two Pedgrifts was almost equivalent to an acquaintance with both. Add some little height and size to the figure of Pedgift Junior; give more breadth and boldness to his humour, and some additional solidity and composure to his confidence in himself — and the presence and character of Pedgift Senior stood for all general purposes revealed before you.

The lawyer's conveyance to Thorpe-Ambrose was his own smart gig, drawn by his famous fast-trotting mare. It was his habit to drive himself; and it was one among the trifling external peculiarities in which he and his son differed a little, to affect something of the sporting character in his dress. The drab trousers of Pedgift the elder fitted close to his legs; his boots in dry weather and wet alike, were equally thick in the sole; his coat pockets overlapped his hips, and his favourite summer cravat was of light spotted muslin, tied in the neatest and smallest of bows. He used tobacco like his son, but in a different form. While the younger man smoked, the elder took snuff copiously; and it was noticed among his intimates that he always held his "pinch" in a state of suspense between his box and his nose, when he was going to clinch a good bargain, or to say a good thing. The art of diplomacy enters largely into the practice of all successful men in the lower branch of the law. Mr. Pedgift's form of diplomatic practice had been the same throughout his life, on every occasion when he found his arts of persuasion required at an interview with another man. He invariably kept his strongest argument, or his boldest proposal, to the last, and

invariably remembered it at the door (after previously taking his leave), as if it was a purely accidental consideration which had that instant occurred to him. Jocular friends, acquainted by previous experience with this form of proceeding, had given it the name of "Pedgift's postscript." There were few people in Thorpe-Ambrose who did not know what it meant, when the lawyer suddenly checked his exit at the opened door; came back softly to his chair, with his pinch of snuff suspended between his box and his nose; said, "By-the-by, there's a point occurs to me;" and settled the question off-hand, after having given it up in despair not a minute before.

This was the man whom the march of events at Thorpe-Ambrose had now thrust capriciously into a foremost place. This was the one friend at hand to whom Allan in his social isolation could turn for counsel in the hour of need.

"Good evening, Mr. Armadale. Many thanks for your prompt attention to my very disagreeable letter," said Pedgrift Senior, opening the conversation cheerfully the moment he entered his client's house. "I hope you understand, sir, that I had really no choice under the circumstances but to write as I did?"

"I have very few friends, Mr. Pedgift," returned Allan simply. "And I am sure you are one of the few."

"Much obliged, Mr. Armadale. I have always tried to deserve your good opinion, and I mean, if I can, to deserve it now. You found yourself comfortable, I hope, sir, at the hotel in London? We call it Our hotel. Some rare old wine in the cellar,

which I should have introduced to your notice if I had had the honour of being with you. My son unfortunately knows nothing about wine."

Allan felt his false position in the neighbourhood far too acutely to be capable of talking of anything but the main business of the evening. His lawyer's politely roundabout method of approaching the painful subject to be discussed between them, rather irritated than composed him. He came at once to the point, in his own bluntly straightforward way.

"The hotel was very comfortable, Mr. Pedgift, and your son was very kind to me. But we are not in London now; and I want to talk to you about how I am to meet the lies that are being told of me in this place. Only point me out any one man," cried Allan, with a rising voice and a mounting colour, — "any one man who says I am afraid to show my face in the neighbourhood; and I'll horsewhip him publicly before another day is over his head!"

Pedgift Senior helped himself to a pinch of snuff, and held it calmly in suspense midway between his box and his nose.

"You can horsewhip a man, sir; but you can't horsewhip a neighbourhood," said the lawyer in his politely epigrammatic manner. "We will fight our battle, if you please, without borrowing our weapons of the coachman yet awhile, at any rate."

"But how are we to begin?" asked Allan impatiently. "How am I to contradict the infamous things they say of me?"

"There are two ways of stepping out of your present awkward position, sir — a short way, and a long way," replied Pedgift Senior. "The short

way (which is always the best) has occurred to me since I have heard of your proceedings in London from my son. I understand that you permitted him, after you received my letter, to take me into your confidence. I have drawn various conclusions from what he has told me, which I may find it necessary to trouble you with presently. In the meantime I should he glad to know under what circumstances you went to London to make these unfortunate inquiries about Miss Gwilt? Was it your own notion to pay that visit to Mrs. Mandeville? or were you acting under the influence of some other person?"

Allan hesitated. "I can't honestly tell you it was my own notion," he replied — and said no more.

"I thought as much!" remarked Pedgift Senior in high triumph. "The short way out of our present difficulty, Mr. Armadale, lies straight through that other person, under whose influence you acted. That other person must be presented forthwith to public notice, and must stand in that other person's proper place. The name if you please, sir, to begin with — we'll come to the circumstances directly."

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Pedgift, that we must try the longest way, if you have no objection," replied Allen quietly. "The short way happens to be a way I can't take on this occasion."

The men who rise in the law are the men who decline to take No for an answer. Mr. Pedgift the elder had risen in the law; and Mr. Pedgift the elder now declined to take No for an answer. But all pertinacity — even professional pertinacity included — sooner or later finds its limits; and the lawyer, doubly

fortified as he was by long experience and copious pinches of snuff, found his limits at the very outset of the interview. It was impossible that Allan could respect the confidence which Mrs. Milroy had treacherously affected to place in him. But he had an honest man's regard for his own pledged word — the regard which looks straightforward at the fact, and which never glances sidelong at the circumstances — and the utmost persistency of Pedgift Senior failed to move him a hair's-breadth from the position he had taken up. "No" is the strongest word in the which English language, in the mouth of anyman who has the courage to repeat it often enough — and Allan had the courage to repeat it often enough on this occasion.

"Very good, sir," said the lawyer, accepting his defeat without the slightest loss of temper. "The choice rests with you, and you have chosen. We will go the long way. It starts (allow me to inform you) from my office; and it leads (as I strongly suspect) through a very miry road to — Miss Gwilt."

Allan looked at his legal adviser in speechless astonishment.

"If you won't expose the person who is responsible, in the first instance, sir, for the inquiries to which you unfortunately lent yourself," proceeded Mr. Pedgift the elder, "the only other alternative, in your present position, is to justify the inquiries themselves."

"And how is that to be done?" inquired Allan.

"By proving to the whole neighbourhood, Mr. Armadale, what I firmly believe to be the truth — that the pet object of the public protection is an ad-

venturess of the worst class; an undeniably worthless and dangerous woman. In plainer English still, sir, by employing time enough and money enough to discover the truth about Miss Gwilt."

Before Allan could say a word in answer, there was an interruption at the door. After the usual preliminary knock, one of the servants came in.

"I told you I was not to be interrupted," said Allan irritably. "Good heavens! am I never to have done with them? another letter!"

"Yes, sir," said the man, holding it out. "And," he added, speaking words of evil omen in his master's ears, "the person waits for an answer."

Allan looked at the address of the letter with a natural expectation of encountering the handwriting of the major's wife. The anticipation was not realized. His correspondent was plainly a lady, but the lady was not Mrs. Milroy.

"Who can it be?" he said, looking mechanically at Pedgift Senior as he opened the envelope.

Pedgift Senior gently tapped his snuff-box, and said without a moment's hesitation — "Miss Gwilt."

Allan opened the letter. The first two words in it were the echo of the two words the lawyer had just pronounced. It *was* Miss Gwilt!

Once more, Allan looked at his legal adviser in speechless astonishment.

"I have known a good many of them in my time, sir," explained Pedgift Senior, with a modesty equally rare and becoming in a man of his age. "Not as handsome as Miss Gwilt, I admit. But quite as bad,

I dare say. Read your letter, Mr. Armadale — read your letter."

Allan read these lines: —

"Miss Gwilt presents her compliments to Mr. Armadale, and begs to know if it will be convenient to him to favour her with an interview, either this evening or to-morrow morning. Miss Gwilt offers no apology for making her present request. She believes Mr. Armadale will grant it as an act of justice towards a friendless woman whom he has been innocently the means of injuring, and who is earnestly desirous to set herself right in his estimation."

Allan handed the letter to his lawyer in silent perplexity and distress.

The face of Mr. Pedgift the elder expressed but one feeling when he had read the letter in his turn and had handed it back — a feeling of profound admiration. "What a lawyer she would have made," he exclaimed, fervently, "if she had only been a man!"

"I can't treat this as lightly as you do, Mr. Pedgift," said Allan. "It's dreadfully distressing to me. I was so fond of her," he added, in a lower tone, — "I was so fond of her once."

Mr. Pedgift Senior suddenly became serious on his side.

"Do you mean to say, sir, that you actually contemplate seeing Miss Gwilt?" he asked, with an expression of genuine dismay.

"I can't treat her cruelly," returned Allan. "I have been the means of injuring her — without intending it, God knows! — I can't treat her cruelly after that!"

"Mr. Armadale," said the lawyer, "you did me the honour, a little while since, to say that you considered me your friend. May I presume on that position to ask you a question or two, before you go straight to your own ruin?"

"Any questions you like," said Allan, looking back at the letter — the only letter he had ever received from Miss Gwilt.

"You have had one trap set for you already, sir, and you have fallen into it. Do you want to fall into another?"

"You know the answer to that question, Mr. Pedgift, as well as I do."

"I'll try again, Mr. Armadale; we lawyers are not easily discouraged. Do you think that any statement Miss Gwilt might make to you, if you do see her, would be a statement to be relied on, after what you and my son discovered in London?"

"She might explain what we discovered in London," suggested Allan, still looking at the writing, and thinking of the hand that had traced it.

"*Might* explain it? My dear sir, she is quite certain to explain it! I will do her justice: I believe she would make out a case without a single flaw in it from beginning to end."

That last answer forced Allan's attention away from the letter. The lawyer's pitiless common sense showed him no mercy.

"If you see that woman again, sir," proceeded Pedgift Senior, "you will commit the rashest act of folly I ever heard of in all my experience. She can have but one object in coming here — to practise on your weakness for her. Nobody can say into what

false step she may not lead you, if you once give her the opportunity. You admit yourself that you have been fond of her — your attentions to her have been the subject of general remark — if you haven't actually offered her the chance of becoming Mrs. Armadale, you have done the next thing to it — and knowing all this, you propose to see her and to let her work on you with her devilish beauty and her devilish cleverness, in the character of your interesting victim! You, who are one of the best matches in England! You who are the natural prey of all the hungry single women in the community! I never heard the like of it; I never, in all my professional experience, heard the like of it! If you must positively put yourself in a dangerous position, Mr. Armadale," concluded Pedgift the elder, with the everlasting pinch of snuff held in suspense between his box and his nose, "there's a wild-beast show coming to our town next week. Let in the tigress, sir, — don't let in Miss Gwilt!"

For the third time Allan looked at his lawyer. And for the third time his lawyer looked back at him quite unabashed.

"You seem to have a very bad opinion of Miss Gwilt," said Allan.

"The worst possible opinion, Mr. Armadale," retorted Pedgift Senior, coolly. "We will return to that, when we have sent the lady's messenger about his business. Will you take my advice? Will you decline to see her?"

"I would willingly decline — it would be so dreadfully distressing to both of us," said Allan. "I would willingly decline, if I only knew how."

"Bless my soul, Mr. Armadale, it's easy enough!

Don't commit yourself in writing. Send out to the messenger, and say there's no answer."

The short course thus suggested, was a course which Allan positively declined to take. "It's treating her brutally," he said; "I can't and won't do it."

Once more, the pertinacity of Pedgift the elder found its limits — and once more that wise man yielded gracefully to a compromise. On receiving his client's promise not to see Miss Gwilt, he consented to Allan's committing himself in writing — under his lawyer's dictation. The letter thus produced was modelled in Allan's own style; it began and ended in one sentence. "Mr. Armadale presents his compliments to Miss Gwilt, and regrets that he cannot have the pleasure of seeing her at Thorpe-Ambrose." Allan had pleaded hard for a second sentence, explaining that he only declined Miss Gwilt's request from a conviction that an interview would be needlessly distressing on both sides. But his legal adviser firmly rejected the proposed addition to the letter. "When you say No to a woman, sir," remarked Pedgift Senior, "always say it in one word. If you give her your reasons, she invariably believes that you mean Yes."

Producing that little gem of wisdom from the rich mine of his professional experience, Mr. Pedgift the elder sent out the answer to Miss Gwilt's messenger, and recommended the servant to "see the fellow, whoever he was, well clear of the house."

"Now, sir," said the lawyer, "we will come back, if you like, to my opinion of Miss Gwilt. It doesn't at all agree with yours, I'm afraid. You think her an object for pity — quite natural at your age. I think

her an object for the inside of a prison — quite natural at mine. You shall hear the grounds on which I have formed my opinion directly. Let me show you that I am in earnest by putting the opinion itself, in the first place, to a practical test. Do you think Miss Gwilt is likely to persist in paying you a visit, Mr. Armadale, after the answer you have just sent to her?"

"Quite impossible!" cried Allan, warmly. "Miss Gwilt is a lady; after the letter I have sent to her, she will never come near me again."

"There we join issue, sir," cried Pedgift Senior. "I say she will snap her fingers at your letter (which was one of the reasons why I objected to your writing it). I say, she is in all probability waiting her messenger's return, in or near your grounds at this moment. I say, she will try to force her way in here, before four-and-twenty hours more are over your head. Egad, sir!" cried Mr. Pedgift, looking at his watch, "it's only seven o'clock now. She's bold enough and clever enough to catch you unawares this very evening. Permit me to ring for the servant — permit me to request that you will give him orders immediately to say you are not at home. You needn't hesitate, Mr. Armadale! If you're right about Miss Gwilt, it's a mere formality. If I'm right it's a wise precaution. Back your opinion, sir," said Mr. Pedgift, ringing the bell, "I back mine!"

Allan was sufficiently nettled when the bell rang, to feel ready to give the order. But when the servant came in, past remembrances got the better of him, and the words stuck in his throat. "You give the order," he said to Mr. Pedgift — and walked away abruptly

to the window. "You're a good fellow!" thought the old lawyer, looking after him, and penetrating his motive on the instant. "The claws of that she-devil shan't cratch you if I can help it."

The servant waited inexorably for his orders.

"If Miss Gwilt calls here, either this evening, or at any other time," said Pedgift Senior, "Mr. Armadale is not at home. Wait! If she asks when Mr. Armadale will be back, you don't know. Wait! If she proposes coming in and sitting down, you have a general order that nobody is to come in and sit down, unless they have a previous appointment with Mr. Armadale. Come!" cried old Pedgift, rubbing his hands cheerfully when the servant had left the room, "I've stopped her out now, at any rate! The orders are all given, Mr. Armadale. We may go on with our conversation."

Allan came back from the window. "The conversation is not a very pleasant one," he said. "No offence to you, but I wish it was over."

"We will get it over as soon as possible, sir," said Pedgift Senior, still persisting as only lawyers and women *can* persist, in forcing his way little by little nearer and nearer to his own object. "Let us go back, if you please, to the practical suggestion which I offered to you when the servant came in with Miss Gwilt's note. There is, I repeat, only one way left for you, Mr. Armadale, out of your present awkward position. You must pursue your inquiries about this woman to an end — on the chance (which I consider next to a certainty) that the end will justify you in the estimation of the neighbourhood."

"I wish to God I had never made any inquiries at

all!" said Allan. "Nothing will induce me, Mr. Pedgift, to make any more."

"Why?" asked the lawyer,

"Can you ask me why," retorted Allan, hotly, "after your son has told you what we found out in London? Even if I had less cause to be — to be sorry for Miss Gwilt than I have; even if it was some other woman, do you think I would inquire any further into the secret of a poor betrayed creature — much less expose it to the neighbourhood? I should think myself as great a scoundrel as the man who has cast her out helpless on the world, if I did anything of the kind. I wonder you can ask me the question — upon my soul, I wonder you can ask me the question!"

"Give me your hand, Mr. Armadale!" cried Pedgift Senior, warmly; "I honour you for being so angry with me. The neighbourhood may say what it pleases; you're a gentleman, sir, in the best sense of the word. Now," pursued the lawyer, dropping Allan's hand, and lapsing back instantly from sentiment to business, "just hear what I have got to say in my own defence. Suppose Miss Gwilt's real position happens to be nothing like what you are generously determined to believe it to be?"

"We have no reason to suppose that," said Allan resolutely.

"Such is your opinion, sir," persisted Pedgift. "Mine, founded on what is publicly known of Miss Gwilt's proceedings here, and on what I have seen of Miss Gwilt herself, is that she is as far as I am from being the sentimental victim you are inclined to make her out. Gently, Mr. Armadale! remember that I have put my opinion to a practical test, and wait to con-

demn it off-hand until events have justified you. Let me put my points, sir, — make allowances for me as a lawyer — and let me put my points. You and my son are young men; and I don't deny that the circumstances, on the surface, appear to justify the interpretation which, as young men, you have placed on them. I am an old man — I know that circumstances are not always to be taken as they appear on the surface — and I possess the great advantage, in the present case, of having had years of professional experience among some of the wickedest women who ever walked this earth."

Allan opened his lips to protest, and checked himself, in despair of producing the slightest effect. Pedgift Senior bowed in polite acknowledgment of his client's self-restraint, and took instant advantage of it to go on.

"All Miss Gwilt's proceedings," he resumed, "since your unfortunate correspondence with the major, show me that she is an old hand at deceit. The moment she is threatened with exposure — exposure of some kind, there can be no doubt, after what you discovered in London — she turns your honourable silence to the best possible account, and leaves the major's service in the character of a martyr. Once out of the house, what does she do next? She boldly stops in the neighbourhood, and serves three excellent purposes by doing so. In the first place, she shows everybody that she is not afraid of facing another attack on her reputation. In the second place, she is close at hand to twist you round her little finger, and to become Mrs. Armadale in spite of circumstances, if you (and I) allow her the opportunity. In the third place, if you (and I)

are wise enough to distrust her, she is equally wise on her side, and doesn't give us the first great chance of following her to London, and associating her with her accomplices. Is this the conduct of an unhappy woman who has lost her character in a moment of weakness, and who has been driven unwillingly into a deception to get it back again?"

"You put it cleverly," said Allan, answering with marked reluctance; "I can't deny that you put it cleverly."

"Your own common sense, Mr. Armadale, is beginning to tell you that I put it justly," said Pedgift Senior. "I don't presume to say yet what this woman's connection may be with those people at Pimlico. All I assert is, that it is not the connection you suppose. Having stated the facts so far, I have only to add my own personal impression of Miss Gwilt. I won't shock you, if I can help it — I'll try if I can't put it cleverly again. She came to my office (as I told you in my letter), no doubt to make friends with your lawyer, if she could — she came to tell me in the most forgiving and Christian manner, that she didn't blame *you*."

"Do you ever believe in anybody, Mr. Pedgift?" interposed Allan.

"Sometimes, Mr. Armadale," returned Pedgift the elder, as unabashed as ever. "I believe as often as a lawyer can. To proceed, sir. When I was in the criminal branch of practice, it fell to my lot to take instructions for the defence of women committed for trial, from the women's own lips. Whatever other difference there might be among them, I got, in time, to notice, among those who were particularly wicked and

unquestionably guilty, one point in which they all resembled each other. Tall and short, old and young, handsome and ugly, they all had a secret self-possession that nothing could shake. On the surface they were as different as possible. Some of them were in a state of indignation; some of them were drowned in tears; some of them were full of pious confidence; and some of them were resolved to commit suicide before the night was out. But only put your finger suddenly on the weak point in the story told by any one of them, and there was an end of her rage, or her tears, or her piety, or her despair — and out came the genuine woman, in full possession of all her resources, with a neat little lie that exactly suited the circumstances of the case. Miss Gwilt was in tears, sir, — becoming tears that didn't make her nose red, — and I put my finger suddenly on the weak point in *her* story. Down dropped her pathetic pocket-handkerchief from her beautiful blue eyes, and out came the genuine woman with the neat little lie that exactly suited the circumstances! I felt twenty years younger, Mr. Armadale, on the spot. I declare I thought I was in Newgate again, with my note-book in my hand, taking my instructions for the defence!"

"The next thing you'll say, Mr. Pedgift," cried Allan, angrily, "is that Miss Gwilt has been in prison!"

Pedgift Senior calmly rapped his snuff-box, and had his answer ready at a moment's notice.

"She may have richly deserved to see the inside of a prison, Mr. Armadale; but, in the age we live in, that is one excellent reason for her never having been near any place of the kind. A prison, in the present tender state of public feeliug, for a charming woman

like Miss Gwilt! My dear sir, if she had attempted to murder you or me, and if an inhuman judge and jury had decided on sending her to a prison, the first object of modern society would be to prevent her going into it; and, if that couldn't be done, the next object would be to let her out again as soon as possible. Read your newspaper, Mr. Armadale, and you'll find we live in piping times for the black sheep of the community — if they are only black enough. I insist on asserting, sir, that we have got one of the blackest of the lot to deal with in this case. I insist on asserting that you have had the rare luck, in these unfortunate inquiries, to pitch on a woman who happens to be a fit object for inquiry, in the interests of the public protection. Differ with me as strongly as you please — but don't make up your mind finally about Miss Gwilt, until events have put those two opposite opinions of ours to the test that I have proposed. A fairer test there can't be. I agree with you, that no lady worthy of the name could attempt to force her way in here, after receiving your letter. But I deny that Miss Gwilt *is* worthy of the name; and I say she will try to force her way in here in spite of you."

"And I say she won't!" retorted Allan firmly.

Pedgift Senior leaned back in his chair and smiled. There was a momentary silence — and in that silence, the door-bell rang.

The lawyer and the client both looked expectantly in the direction of the hall.

"No!" cried Allan, more angrily than ever.

"Yes!" said Pedgift Senior, contradicting him with the utmost politeness.

They waited the event. The opening of the house-

door was audible, but the room was too far from it for the sound of voices to reach the ear as well. After a long interval of expectation, the closing of the door was heard at last. Allan rose impetuously, and rang the bell. Mr. Pedgift the elder sat sublimely calm, and enjoyed, with a gentle zest, the largest pinch of snuff he had taken yet.

"Anybody for me?" asked Allan, when the servant came in.

"The man looked at Pedgift Senior, with an expression of unutterable reverence, and answered — "Miss Gwilt."

"I don't want to crow over you, sir," said Mr. Pedgift the elder, when the servant had withdrawn. "But what do you think of Miss Gwilt *now?*"

Allan shook his head in silent discouragement and distress.

"Time is of some importance, Mr. Armadale. After what has just happened, do you still object to taking the course I have had the honour of suggesting to you?"

"I can't, Mr. Pedgift," said Allan. "I can't be the means of disgracing her in the neighbourhood. I would rather be disgraced myself — as I am."

"Let me put it in another way, sir. Excuse my persisting. You have been very kind to me and my family; and I have a personal interest, as well as a professional interest in you. If you can't prevail on yourself to show this woman's character in its true light, will you take common precautions to prevent her doing any more harm? Will you consent to having her privately watched, as long as she remains in this neighbourhood?"

For the second time, Allan shook his head.

"Is that your final resolution, sir?"

"It is, Mr. Pedgift; but I am much obliged to you for your advice, all the same."

Pedgift Senior rose in a state of gentle resignation, and took up his hat. "Good evening, sir," he said, and made sorrowfully for the door. Allan rose on his side, innocently supposing that the interview was at an end. Persons better acquainted with the diplomatic habits of his legal adviser, would have recommended him to keep his seat. The time was ripe for "Pedgift's postscript," and the lawyer's indicative snuff-box was at that moment in one of his hands, as he opened the door with the other.

"Good evening," said Allan.

Pedgift Senior opened the door — stopped — considered — closed the door again — came back mysteriously with his pinch of snuff in suspense between his box and his nose — and repeating his invariable formula, "By-the-by, there's a point occurs to me," quietly resumed possession of his empty chair.

Allan, wondering, took the seat, in his turn, which he had just left. Lawyer and client looked at each other once more, and the inexhaustible interview began again.

CHAPTER VI.

Pedgift's Postscript.

"I MENTIONED that a point had occurred to me, sir," remarked Pedgift Senior.

"You did," said Allan.

"Would you like to hear what it is, Mr. Armadale?"

"If you please," said Allan.

"With all my heart, sir! This is the point. I attach considerable importance — if nothing else can be done — to having Miss Gwilt privately looked after, as long as she stops at Thorpe-Ambrose. It struck me just now at the door, Mr. Armadale, that what you are not willing to do for your own security, you might be willing to do for the security of another person."

"What other person?" inquired Allan.

"A young lady who is a near neighbour of yours, sir. Shall I mention the name, in confidence? Miss Milroy."

Allan started, and changed colour.

"Miss Milroy!" he repeated. "Can *she* be concerned in this miserable business? I hope not, Mr. Pedgift; I sincerely hope not."

"I paid a visit, in your interests, sir, at the cottage, this morning," proceeded Pedgift Senior. "You shall hear what happened there, and judge for yourself. Major Milroy has been expressing his opinion of you pretty freely; and I thought it highly desirable to give him a caution. It's always the way with those quiet addle-headed men — when they do once wake up, there's no reasoning with their obstinacy, and no quiet-

ing their violence. Well, sir, this morning I went to the cottage. The major and Miss Neelie were both in the parlour — miss not looking so pretty as usual; pale, I thought, pale, and worn, and anxious. Up jumps the addle-headed major (I wouldn't give *that*, Mr. Armadale, for the brains of a man who can occupy himself for half his lifetime in making a clock!) — up jumps the addle-headed major, in the loftiest manner, and actually tries to look me down. Ha! ha! the idea of anybody looking *me* down, at my time of life. I behaved like a Christian; I nodded kindly to old What's-o'clock. 'Fine morning, major,' says I. 'Have you any business with me?' says he. 'Just a word,' says I. Miss Neelie, like the sensible girl she is, gets up to leave the room; and what does her ridiculous father do? He stops her. 'You needn't go, my dear; I have nothing to say to Mr. Pedgift,' says this old military idiot, and turns my way, and tries to look me down again. 'You are Mr. Armadale's lawyer,' says he; 'if you come on any business relating to Mr. Armadale, I refer you to my solicitor.' (His solicitor is Darch; and Darch has had enough of *me* in business, I can tell you!) 'My errand here, major, does certainly relate to Mr. Armadale,' says I; 'but it doesn't concern your lawyer — at any rate, just yet. I wish to caution you to suspend your opinion of my client, or, if you won't do that, to be careful how you express it in public. I warn you that our turn is to come, and that you are not at the end yet, of this scandal about Miss Gwilt." It struck me as likely that he would lose his temper when he found himself tackled in that way, and he amply fulfilled my expectations. He was quite violent in his language — the poor weak creature —

actually violent with *me!* I behaved like a Christian again; I nodded kindly, and wished him good morning. When I looked round to wish Miss Neelie good morning too, she was gone. You seem restless, Mr. Armadale," remarked Pedgift Senior, as Allan, feeling the sting of old recollections, suddenly started out of his chair, and began pacing up and down the room. "I won't try your patience much longer, sir; I am coming to the point."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Pedgift," said Allan, returning to his seat, and trying to look composedly at the lawyer through the intervening image of Neelie which the lawyer had called up.

"Well, sir, I left the cottage," resumed Pedgift Senior. "Just as I turned the corner from the garden into the park who should I stumble on but Miss Neelie herself, evidently on the look-out for me. 'I want to speak to you for one moment, Mr. Pedgift!' says she. 'Does Mr. Armadale think *me* mixed up in this matter?' She was violently agitated — tears in her eyes, sir, of the sort which my legal experience has *not* accustomed me to see. I quite forgot myself; I actually gave her my arm, and led her away gently among the trees. (A nice position to find me in, if any of the scandal-mongers of the town had happened to be walking in that direction!) 'My dear Miss Milroy,' says I, 'why should Mr. Armadale think *you* mixed up in it?'"

"You ought to have told her at once that I thought nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Allan, indignantly. "Why did you leave her a moment in doubt about it?"

"Because I am a lawyer, Mr. Armadale," rejoined Pedgift Senior, drily. "Even in moments of sentiment, under convenient trees, with a pretty girl on my arm,

I can't entirely divest myself of my professional caution. Don't look distressed, sir, pray! I set things right in due course of time. Before I left Miss Milroy, I told her, in the plainest terms, no such idea had ever entered your head."

"Did she seem relieved?" asked Allan.

"She was able to dispense with the use of my arm, sir," replied old Pedgift, as drily as ever, "and to pledge me to inviolable secrecy on the subject of our interview. She was particularly desirous that *you* should hear nothing about it. If you are at all anxious on your side, to know why I am now betraying her confidence, I beg to inform you that her confidence related to no less a person than the lady who favoured you with a call just now — Miss Gwilt."

Allan, who had been once more restlessly pacing the room, stopped, and returned to his chair.

"Is this serious?" he asked.

"Most serious, sir," returned Pedgift Senior. "I am betraying Miss Neelie's secret, in Miss Neelie's own interest. Let us go back to that cautious question I put to her. She found some little difficulty in answering it — for the reply involved her in a narrative of the parting interview between her governess and herself. This is the substance of it. The two were alone when Miss Gwilt took leave of her pupil; and the words she used (as reported to me by Miss Neelie) were these. She said, 'Your mother has declined to allow me to take leave of her. Do you decline too?' Miss Neelie's answer was a remarkably sensible one for a girl of her age. 'We have not been good friends,' she said, 'and I believe we are equally glad to part with each other. But I have no wish to decline taking

leave of you.' Saying that, she held out her hand. Miss Gwilt stood looking at her steadily, without taking it, and addressed her in these words: — '*You are not Mrs. Armadale yet.*' Gently, sir! Keep your temper. It's not at all wonderful that a woman conscious of having her own mercenary designs on you, should attribute similar designs to a young lady who happens to be your near neighbour. Let me go on. Miss Neelie, by her own confession (and quite naturally, I think) was excessively indignant. She owns to having answered, 'You shameless creature, how dare you say that to me!' Miss Gwilt's rejoinder was rather a remarkable one — the anger, on her side, appears to have been of the cool, still, venomous kind. 'Nobody ever yet injured me, Miss Milroy,' she said, 'without sooner or later bitterly repenting it. *You* will bitterly repent it.' She stood looking at her pupil for a moment in dead silence, and then left the room. Miss Neelie appears to have felt the imputation fastened on her, in connection with you, far more sensitively than she felt the threat. She had previously known, as everybody had known in the house that some unacknowledged proceedings of yours in London had led to Miss Gwilt's voluntary withdrawal from her situation. And she now inferred, from the language addressed to her, that she was actually believed by Miss Gwilt to have set those proceedings on foot, to advance herself, and to injure her governess, in your estimation. Gently, sir, gently! I haven't quite done yet. As soon as Miss Neelie had recovered herself, she went upstairs to speak to Mrs. Milroy. Miss Gwilt's abominable imputation had taken her by surprise; and she went to her mother first for enlightenment and advice. She got neither the one

nor the other. Mrs. Milroy declared she was too ill to enter on the subject, and she has remained too ill to enter on it ever since. Miss Neelie applied next to her father. The major stopped her the moment your name passed her lips: he declared he would never hear you mentioned again by any member of his family. She has been left in the dark from that time to this — not knowing how she might have been misrepresented by Miss Gwilt, or what falsehoods you might have been led to believe of her. At my age and in my profession, I don't profess to have any extraordinary softness of heart. But I do think, Mr. Armadale, that Miss Neelie's position deserves our sympathy."

"I'll do anything to help her!" cried Allan, impulsively. "You don't know, Mr. Pedgift, what reason I have ——" He checked himself, and confusedly repeated his first words. "I'll do anything," he reiterated earnestly — "anything in the world to help her!"

"Do you really mean that, Mr. Armadale? Excuse my asking — but you can very materially help Miss Neelie if you choose!"

"How?" asked Allan. "Only tell me how!"

"By giving me your authority, sir, to protect her from Miss Gwilt."

Having fired that shot point-blank at his client, the wise lawyer waited a little to let it take its effect before he said any more.

Allan's face clouded, and he shifted uneasily from side to side of his chair.

"Your son is hard enough to deal with, Mr. Pedgift," he said, "and you are harder than your son."

"Thank you, sir," rejoined the ready Pedgift, "in my son's name and my own, for a handsome compliment to the firm. If you really wish to be of assistance to Miss Neelie," he went on more seriously, "I have shown you the way. You can do nothing to quiet her anxiety, which I have not done already. As soon as I had assured her that no misconception of her conduct existed in your mind, she went away satisfied. Her governess's parting threat doesn't seem to have dwelt on her memory. I can tell you, Mr. Armadale, it dwells on mine! You know my opinion of Miss Gwilt; and you know what Miss Gwilt herself has done this very evening, to justify that opinion even in your eyes. May I ask, after all that has passed, whether you think she is the sort of woman who can be trusted to confine herself to empty threats?"

The question was a formidable one to answer. Forced steadily back from the position which he had occupied at the outset of the interview, by the irresistible pressure of plain facts, Allan began for the first time to show symptoms of yielding on the subject of Miss Gwilt. "Is there no other way of protecting Miss Milroy but the way you have mentioned?" he asked uneasily.

"Do you think the major would listen to you. sir, if you spoke to him?" asked Pedgift Senior sarcastically; "I'm rather afraid he wouldn't honour *me* with his attention. Or perhaps you would prefer alarming Miss Neelie by telling her in plain words that we both think her in danger? Or, suppose you send me to Miss Gwilt, with instructions to inform her that she has done her pupil a cruel injustice? Women are so proverbially ready to listen to reason; and they are so

universally disposed to alter their opinions of each other on application — especially when one woman thinks that another woman has destroyed her prospect of making a good marriage. Don't mind *me*, Mr. Armadale — I'm only a lawyer, and I can sit waterproof under another shower of Miss Gwilt's tears!"

"Damn it, Mr. Pedgift, tell me in plain words what you want to do!" cried Allan, losing his temper at last.

"In plain words, Mr. Armadale, I want to keep Miss Gwilt's proceedings privately under view, as long as she stops in this neighbourhood. I answer for finding a person who will look after her delicately and discreetly. And I agree to discontinue even this harmless superintendence of her actions, if there isn't good reasons shown for continuing it, to your entire satisfaction, in a week's time. I make that moderate proposal, sir, in what I sincerely believe to be Miss Milroy's interest, and I wait your answer, Yes or No."

"Can't I have time to consider?" asked Allan, driven to the last helpless expedient of taking refuge in delay.

"Certainly, Mr. Armadale. But don't forget, while you are considering, that Miss Milroy is in the habit of walking out alone in your park, innocent of all apprehension of danger — and that Miss Gwilt is perfectly free to take any advantage of that circumstance that Miss Gwilt pleases."

"Do as you like!" exclaimed Allan in despair. "And, for God's sake, don't torment me any longer!"

Popular prejudice may deny it — but the profession of the law is a practically Christian profession in one respect at least. Of all the large collection of

ready answers lying in wait for mankind on a lawyer's lips, none is kept in better working order than "the soft answer which turneth away wrath." Pedgift Senior rose with the alacrity of youth in his legs, and the wise moderation of age on his tongue. "Many thanks, sir," he said, "for the attention you have bestowed on me. I congratulate you on your decision, and I wish you good evening." This time, his indicative snuff-box was not in his hand when he opened the door, and he actually disappeared, without coming back for a second postscript.

Allan's head sank on his breast, when he was left alone. "If it was only the end of the week!" he thought longingly. "If I only had Midwinter back again!"

As the aspiration escaped the client's lips, the lawyer got gaily into his gig. "Hie away, old girl!" cried Pedgift Senior, patting the fast-trotting mare with the end of his whip. "I never keep a lady waiting — and I've got business to-night with one of your own sex!"

CHAPTER VII.

The Martyrdom of Miss Gwilt.

THE outskirts of the little town of Thorpe-Ambrose, on the side nearest to "the great house," have earned some local celebrity as exhibiting the prettiest suburb of the kind to be found in East Norfolk. Here, the villas and gardens are for the most part built and laid out in excellent taste; the trees are in the prime of their growth; and the healthy common beyond the houses,

rises and falls in picturesque and delightful variety of broken ground. The rank, fashion, and beauty of the town make this place their evening promenade; and when a stranger goes out for a drive, if he leaves it to the coachman, the coachman starts by way of the common as a matter of course.

On the opposite side, that is to say, on the side farthest from "the great house," the suburbs (in the year eighteen hundred and fifty-one) were universally regarded as a sore subject by all persons zealous for the reputation of the town.

Here, Nature was uninviting; man was poor; and social progress, as exhibited under the form of building, halted miserably. The streets dwindled feebly as they receded from the centre of the town, into smaller and smaller houses, and died away on the barren open ground into an atrophy of skeleton cottages. Builders hereabouts appeared to have universally abandoned their work in the first stage of its creation. Landholders set up poles on lost patches of ground; and, plaintively advertising that they were to let for building, raised sickly little crops meanwhile, in despair of finding a purchaser to deal with them. All the waste paper of the town seemed to float congenially to this neglected spot; and all the fretful children came and cried here, in charge of all the slatternly nurses who disgraced the place. If there was any intention in Thorpe-Ambrose of sending a worn-out horse to the knacker's, that horse was sure to be found waiting his doom in a field on this side of the town. No growth flourished in these desert regions, but the arid growth of rubbish; and no creatures rejoiced but the creatures of the night — the

vermin here and there in the beds, and the cats everywhere on the tiles.

The sun had set, and the summer twilight was darkening. The fretful children were crying in their cradles; the horse destined for the knacker dozed forlorn in the field of his imprisonment; the cats waited stealthily in corners for the coming night. But one living figure appeared in the lonely suburb — the figure of Mr. Bashwood. But one faint sound disturbed the dreadful silence — the sound of Mr. Bashwood's softly-stepping feet.

Moving slowly past the heaps of bricks rising at intervals along the road; coasting carefully round the old iron, and the broken tiles scattered here and there in his path, Mr. Bashwood advanced from the direction of the country towards one of the unfinished streets of the suburb. His personal appearance had been apparently made the object of some special attention. His false teeth were brilliantly white; his wig was carefully brushed; his mourning garments, renewed throughout, gleamed with the hideous and slimy gloss of cheap black cloth. He moved with a nervous jauntiness, and looked about him with a vacant smile. Having reached the first of the skeleton cottages, his watery eyes settled steadily for the first time on the view of the street before him. The next instant he started; his breath quickened; he leaned trembling and flushing against the unfinished wall at his side. A lady, still at some distance, was advancing towards him down the length of the street. "She's coming!" he whispered, with a strange mixture of rapture and fear, of alternating colour and paleness, showing itself in his haggard face. "I wish I was the ground she treads on! I wish I was

the glove she's got on her hand!" He burst ecstatically into those extravagant words, with a concentrated intensity of delight in uttering them that actually shook his feeble figure from head to foot.

Smoothly and gracefully the lady glided nearer and nearer, until she revealed to Mr. Bashwood's eyes, what Mr. Bashwood's instincts had recognized in the first instance — the face of Miss Gwilt.

She was dressed with an exquisitely expressive economy of outlay. The plainest straw bonnet procurable, trimmed sparingly with the cheapest white ribbon, was on her head. Modest and tasteful poverty expressed itself in the speckless cleanliness and the modestly-proportioned skirts of her light "print" gown, and in the scanty little mantilla of cheap black silk which she wore over it, edged with a simple frilling of the same material. The lustre of her terrible red hair showed itself unshrinkingly in a plaited coronet above her forehead, and escaped in one vagrant lovelock, perfectly curled, that dropped over her left shoulder. Her gloves, fitting her like a second skin, were of the sober brown hue which is slowest to show signs of use. One hand lifted her dress daintily above the impurities of the road; the other held a little nosegay of the commonest garden flowers. Noiselessly and smoothly she came on, with a gentle and regular undulation of the print gown; with the lovelock softly lifted from moment to moment in the evening breeze; with her head a little drooped, and her eyes on the ground—in walk, and look, and manner, in every casual movement that escaped her, expressing that subtle mixture of the voluptuous and the modest which, of the many attractive extremes

that meet in women, is in a man's eyes the most irresistible of all.

"Mr. Bashwood!" she exclaimed, in loud clear tones indicative of the utmost astonishment, "what a surprise to find you here! I thought none but the wretched inhabitants ever ventured near this side of the town. Hush!" she added quickly in a whisper. — "You heard right, when you heard that Mr. Armadale was going to have me followed and watched. There's a man behind one of the houses. We must talk out loud of indifferent things, and look as if we had met by accident. Ask me what I am doing. Out loud! Directly! You shall never see me again, if you don't instantly leave off trembling, and do what I tell you!"

She spoke with a merciless tyranny of eye and voice — with a merciless use of her power over the feeble creature whom she addressed. Mr. Bashwood obeyed her in tones that quavered with agitation, and with eyes that devoured her beauty in a strange fascination of terror and delight.

"I am trying to earn a little money by teaching music," she said, in the voice intended to reach the spy's ears. "If you are able to recommend me any pupils, Mr. Bashwood, your good word will oblige me. Have you been in the grounds to-day?" she went on, dropping her voice again to a whisper. "Has Mr. Armadale been near the cottage? Has Miss Milroy been out of the garden? No? Are you sure? Look out for them to-morrow, and next day, and next day. They are certain to meet and make it up again, and I must and will know of it. Hush! Ask me my terms for teaching music. What are you frightened about? It's me the man's after — not you. Louder than

when you asked me what I was doing, just now; louder, or I won't trust you any more; I'll go to somebody else!"

Once more Mr. Bashwood obeyed. "Don't be angry with me," he murmured faintly, when he had spoken the necessary words. "My heart beats so — you'll kill me!"

"You poor old dear!" she whispered back, with a sudden change in her manner — with an easy satirical tenderness. "What business have you with a heart at your age? Be here to-morrow at the same time, and tell me what you have seen in the grounds. My terms are only five shillings a lesson," she went on, in her louder tone; "I'm sure that's not much, Mr. Bashwood, — I give such long lessons, and I get all my pupils' music half-price." She suddenly dropped her voice again, and looked him brightly into instant subjection. "Don't let Mr. Armadale out of your sight to-morrow! If that girl manages to speak to him, and if I don't hear of it, I'll frighten you to-death. If I *do* hear of it, I'll kiss you! Hush! Wish me good-night, and go on to the town, and leave me to go the other way. I don't want you — I'm not afraid of the man behind the houses; I can deal with him by myself. Say good-night, and I'll let you shake hands. Say it louder, and I'll give you one of my flowers, if you'll promise not to fall in love with it." She raised her voice again. "Good-night, Mr. Bashwood! Don't forget my terms. Five shillings a lesson, and the lessons last an hour at a time, and I get all my pupils' music half-price, which is an immense advantage, isn't it?" She slipped a flower into his hand — frowned him into obedience, and smiled to reward him for obey-

ing, at the same moment — lifted her dress again above the impurities of the road — and went on her way with a dainty and indolent deliberation, as a cat goes on her way when she has exhausted the enjoyment of frightening a mouse.

Left alone, Mr. Bashwood turned to the low cottage wall near which he had been standing, and, resting himself on it wearily, looked at the flower in his hand.

His past existence had disciplined him to bear disaster and insult, as few happier men could have borne them — but it had not prepared him to feel the master-passion of humanity, for the first time, at the dreary end of his life, in the hopeless decay of a manhood that had withered under the double blight of conjugal disappointment and parental sorrow. "Oh, if I was only young again!" murmured the poor wretch, resting his arms on the wall, and touching the flower with his dry fevered lips, in a stealthy rapture of tenderness. "She might have liked me when I was twenty!" He suddenly started back into an erect position, and stared about him in vacant bewilderment and terror. "She told me to go home," he said, with a startled look. "Why am I stopping here?" He turned, and hurried on to the town — in such dread of her anger, if she looked round and saw him, that he never so much as ventured on a backward glance at the road by which she had retired, and never detected the spy dogging her footsteps, under cover of the empty houses and the brick-heaps by the road-side.

Smoothly and gracefully, carefully preserving the speckless integrity of her dress, never hastening her pace, and never looking aside to the right hand or the left, Miss Gwilt pursued her way towards the open

country. The suburban road branched off at its end in two directions. On the left, the path wound through a ragged little coppice, to the grazing grounds of a neighbouring farm. On the right, it led across a hillock of waste land to the high road. Stopping a moment to consider, but not showing the spy that she suspected him, by glancing behind her, while there was a hiding-place within his reach, Miss Gwilt took the path across the hillock. "I'll catch him there," she said to herself, looking up quietly at the long straight line of the empty high road.

Once on the ground that she had chosen for her purpose, she met the difficulties of the position with perfect tact and self-possession. After walking some thirty yards along the road, she let her nosegay drop — half turned round, in stooping to pick it up — saw the man stopping at the same moment behind her — and instantly went on again, quickening her pace, little by little, until she was walking at the top of her speed. The spy fell into the snare laid for him. Seeing the night coming, and fearing that he might lose sight of her in the darkness, he rapidly lessened the distance between them. Miss Gwilt went on faster and faster, till she plainly heard his footstep behind her — then stopped — turned — and met the man face to face the next moment.

"My compliments to Mr. Armadale," she said, "and tell him I've caught you watching me."

"I'm not watching you, miss," retorted the spy, thrown off his guard by the daring plainness of the language in which she had spoken to him.

Miss Gwilt's eyes measured him contemptuously from head to foot. He was a weakly, undersized man,

She was the taller, and (quite possibly) the stronger of the two.

"Take your hat off, you blackguard, when you speak to a lady," she said — and tossed his hat in an instant across a ditch by which they were standing, into a pool on the other side.

This time the spy was on his guard. He knew as well as Miss Gwilt knew, the use which might be made of the precious minutes, if he turned his back on her, and crossed the ditch to recover his hat, "It's well for you you're a woman," he said, standing scowling at her bareheaded in the fast-darkening light.

Miss Gwilt glanced sidelong down the onward vista of the road, and saw, through the gathering obscurity, the solitary figure of a man, rapidly advancing towards her. Some women would have noticed the approach of a stranger at that hour and in that lonely place with a certain anxiety. Miss Gwilt was too confident in her own powers of persuasion not to count on the man's assistance beforehand, whoever he might be, *because* he was a man. She looked back at the spy with redoubled confidence in herself, and measured him contemptuously from head to foot for the second time.

"I wonder whether I'm strong enough to throw you after your hat?" she said. "I'll take a turn and consider it."

She sauntered on a few steps towards the figure advancing along the road. The spy followed her close. "Try it," he said brutally. "You're a fine woman — you're welcome to put your arms round me if you like." As the words escaped him, he too saw the stranger for the first time. He drew back a step and waited. Miss Gwilt, on her side, advanced a step and waited too.

The stranger came on, with the lithe light step of a practised walker, swinging a stick in his hand, and carrying a knapsack on his shoulders. A few paces nearer, and his face became visible. He was a dark man, his black hair was powdered with dust, and his black eyes were looking steadfastly forward along the road before him.

Miss Gwilt advanced with the first signs of agitation she had shown yet. "Is it possible?" she said softly. "Can it really be you!"

It was Midwinter, on his way back to Thorpe-Ambrose, after his fortnight among the Yorkshire moors.

He stopped and looked at her, in breathless surprise. The image of the woman had been in this thoughts, at the moment when the woman herself spoke to him. "Miss Gwilt!" he exclaimed, and mechanically held out his hand.

She took it, and pressed it gently. "I should have been glad to see you at any time," she said. "You don't know how glad I am to see you now. May I trouble you to speak to that man? He has been following me, and annoying me, all the way from the town."

Midwinter stepped past her, without uttering a word. Faint as the light was, the spy saw what was coming in his face, and turning instantly, leapt the ditch by the roadside. Before Midwinter could follow, Miss Gwilt's hand was on his shoulder.

"No," she said. "You don't know who his employer is."

Midwinter stopped, and looked at her.

"Strange things have happened since you left us," she went on. "I have been forced to give up my

situation, and I am followed and watched by a paid spy. Don't ask who forced me out of my situation, and who pays the spy — at least not just yet. I can't make up my mind to tell you till I am a little more composed. Let the wretch go. Do you mind seeing me safe back to my lodging? It's in your way home. May I — may I ask for the support of your arm? My little stock of courage is quite exhausted." She took his arm and clung close to it. The woman who had tyrannized over Mr. Bashwood was gone, and the woman who had tossed the spy's hat into the pool was gone. A timid, shrinking, interesting creature filled the fair skin, and trembled on the symmetrical limbs of Miss Gwilt. She put her handkerchief to her eyes. "They say necessity has no law," she murmured faintly. "I am treating you like an old friend. God knows I want one!"

They went on towards the town. She recovered herself with a touching fortitude — she put her handkerchief back in her pocket, and persisted in turning the conversation on Midwinter's walking tour. "It is bad enough to be a burden on you," she said, gently pressing on his arm as she spoke. "I mustn't distress you as well. Tell me where you have been, and what you have seen. Interest me in your journey; help me to escape from myself."

They reached the modest little lodging, in the miserable little suburb. Miss Gwilt sighed, and removed her glove before she took Midwinter's hand. "I have taken refuge here," she said, simply. "It is clean and quiet — I am too poor to want or expect more. We must say good-by, I suppose, unless —" she hesitated modestly, and satisfied herself by a quick look

round that they were unobserved — "unless you would like to come in and rest a little? I feel so gratefully towards you, Mr. Midwinter! Is there any harm, do you think, in my offering you a cup of tea?"

The magnetic influence of her touch was thrilling through him while she spoke. Change and absence to which he had trusted to weaken her hold on him, had treacherously strengthened it instead. A man exceptionally sensitive, a man exceptionally pure in his past life, he stood hand in hand in the tempting secrecy of the night, with the first woman who had exercised over him the all-absorbing influence of her sex. At his age, and in his position, who could have left her? The man (with a man's temperament) doesn't live who could have left her. Midwinter went in.

A stupid, sleepy lad opened the house-door. Even he, being a male creature, brightened under the influence of Miss Gwilt. "The urn, John," she said, kindly, "and another cup and saucer. I'll borrow your candle to light my candles upstairs — and then I won't trouble you any more to-night." John was wakeful and active in an instant. "No trouble, miss," he said with awkward civility. Miss Gwilt took his candle with a smile. "How good people are to me!" she, whispered innocently to Midwinter, as she led the way upstairs to the little drawing-room on the first floor.

She lit the candles, and, turning quickly on her guest, stopped him at the first attempt he made to remove the knapsack from his shoulders. "No," she said, gently. "In the good old times, there were occasions when the ladies unarmed their knights. I claim the privilege of unarming *my* knight." Her dexterous fingers intercepted his at the straps and buckles, and

she had the dusty knapsack off, before he could protest against her touching it.

They sat down at the one little table in the room. It was very poorly furnished — but there was something of the dainty neatness of the woman who inhabited it in the arrangement of the few poor ornaments on the chimney-piece, in the one or two prettily-bound volumes on the chiffonier, in the flowers on the table, and the modest little work-basket in the window. "Women are not all coquettes," she said, as she took off her bonnet and mantilla, and laid them carefully on a chair. "I won't go into my room, and look in my glass, and make myself smart — you shall take me just as I am." Her hands moved about among the tea-things with a smooth noiseless activity. Her magnificent hair flashed crimson in the candle-light, as she turned her head hither and thither, searching, with an easy grace, for the things she wanted in the tray. Exercise had heightened the brilliancy of her complexion, and had quickened the rapid alternations of expression in her eyes — the delicious languor that stole over them when she was listening or thinking, the bright intelligence that flashed from them softly when she spoke. In the lightest word she said, in the least thing she did, there was something that gently solicited the heart of the man who sat with her. Perfectly modest in her manner, possessed to perfection of the graceful restraints and refinements of a lady, she had all the allurements that feast the eye, all the Siren-invitations that seduce the sense — a subtle suggestiveness in her silence, and a sexual sorcery in her smile.

"Should I be wrong," she asked, suddenly suspending the conversation which she had thus far persistently

restricted to the subject of Midwinter's walking tour, "if I guessed that you have something on your mind — something which neither my tea nor my talk can charm away? Are men as curious as women? Is the something — Me?"

Midwinter struggled against the fascination of looking at her and listening to her. "I am very anxious to hear what has happened since I have been away," he said. "But I am still more anxious, Miss Gwilt, not to distress you by speaking of a painful subject."

She looked at him gratefully. "It is for your sake that I have avoided the painful subject," she said, toying with her spoon among the dregs in her empty cup. "But you will hear about it from others, if you don't hear about it from me; and you ought to know why you found me in that strange situation, and why you see me here. Pray remember one thing to begin with. I don't blame your friend Mr. Armadale — I blame the people whose instrument he is."

Midwinter started. "Is it possible," he began, "that Allan can be in any way answerable ——?" He stopped, and looked at Miss Gwilt in silent astonishment.

She gently laid her hand on his. "Don't be angry with me for only telling the truth," she said. "Your friend is answerable for everything that has happened to me — innocently answerable, Mr. Midwinter, I firmly believe. We are both victims. *He* is the victim of his position as the richest single man in the neighbourhood; and I am the victim of Miss Milroy's determination to marry him."

"Miss Milroy?" repeated Midwinter, more and more

astonished. "Why, Allan himself told me ——" He stopped again.

"He told you that I was the object of his admiration? Poor fellow, he admires everybody — his head is almost as empty as this," said Miss Gwilt, smiling indicatively into the hollow of her cup. She dropped the spoon, sighed, and became serious again. "I am guilty of the vanity of having let him admire me," she went on penitently, "without the excuse of being able, on my side, to reciprocate even the passing interest that he felt in me. I don't undervalue his many admirable qualities, or the excellent position he can offer to his wife. But a woman's heart is not to be commanded — no, Mr. Midwinter, not even by the fortunate master of Thorpe-Ambrose who commands everything else."

She looked him full in the face as she uttered that magnanimous sentiment. His eyes dropped before hers, and his dark colour deepened. He had felt his heart leap in him at the declaration of her indifference to Allan. For the first time since they had known each other, his interests now stood self-revealed before him as openly adverse to the interests of his friend.

"I have been guilty of the vanity of letting Mr. Armadale admire me, and I have suffered for it," resumed Miss Gwilt. "If there had been any confidence between my pupil and me, I might have easily satisfied her that she might become Mrs. Armadale — if she could — without having any rivalry to fear on my part. But Miss Milroy disliked and distrusted me from the first. She took her own jealous view, no doubt, of Mr. Armadale's thoughtless attentions to me. It was her interest to destroy the position, such as it was,

that I held in his estimation; and it is quite likely her mother assisted her. Mrs. Milroy had her motive also (which I am really ashamed to mention) for wishing to drive me out of the house. Anyhow, the conspiracy has succeeded. I have been forced (with Mr. Armadale's help) to leave the major's service. Don't be angry, Mr. Midwinter! don't form a hasty opinion! I daresay Miss Milroy has some good qualities, though I have not found them out; and I assure you again and again that I don't blame Mr. Armadale — I only blame the people whose instrument he is."

"How is he their instrument? How can he be the instrument of any enemy of yours!" asked Midwinter. "Pray excuse my anxiety, Miss Gwilt — Allan's good name is as dear to me as my own!"

Miss Gwilt's eyes turned full on him again, and Miss Gwilt's heart abandoned itself innocently to an outburst of enthusiasm. "How I admire your earnestness!" she said. "How I like your anxiety for your friend! Oh, if women could only form such friendships! Oh, you happy, happy men!" Her voice faltered, and her convenient teacup absorbed her for the third time. "I would give all the little beauty I possess," she said, "if I could only find such a friend as Mr. Armadale has found in *you*. I never shall, Mr. Midwinter, I never shall. Let us go back to what we were talking about. I can only tell you how your friend is concerned in my misfortunes, by telling you something first about myself. I am like many other governesses; I am the victim of sad domestic circumstances. It may be weak of me, but I have a horror of alluding to them among strangers. My silence about my family and my friends exposes me to misinterpretation in my

dependent position. Does it do me any harm, Mr. Midwinter, in your estimation?"

"God forbid!" said Midwinter, fervently. "There is no man living," he went on, thinking of his own family story, "who has better reason to understand and respect your silence than I have."

Miss Gwilt seized his hand impulsively. "Oh," she said, "I knew it, the first moment I saw you! I knew that you, too, had suffered, that you too had sorrows which you kept sacred! Strange, strange sympathy! I believe in mesmerism — do you?" She suddenly recollected herself and shuddered. "Oh, what have I done? what must you think of me?" she exclaimed, as he yielded to the magnetic fascination of her touch, and forgetting everything but the hand that lay warm in his own, bent over it and kissed it. "Spare me!" she said, faintly, as she felt the burning touch of his lips. "I am so friendless, I am so completely at your mercy!"

He turned away from her, and hid his face in his hands — he was trembling, and she saw it. She looked at him, while his face was hidden from her — she looked at him with a furtive interest and surprise. "How that man loves me!" she thought. "I wonder whether there was a time once when I might have loved *him?*"

The silence between them remained unbroken for some minutes. He had felt her appeal to his consideration as she had never expected or intended him to feel it — he shrank from looking at her or from speaking to her again.

"Shall I go on with my story?" she asked. "Shall we forget and forgive on both sides?" A woman's

inveterate indulgence for every expression of a man's admiration which keeps within the limits of personal respect, curved her lips gently into a charming smile. She looked down meditatively at her dress, and brushed a crumb off her lap with a little fluttering sigh. "I was telling you," she went on, "of my reluctance to speak to strangers of my sad family story. It was in that way, as I afterwards found out, that I laid myself open to Miss Milroy's malice and Miss Milroy's suspicion. Private inquiries about me were addressed to the lady who was my reference — at Miss Milroy's suggestion, in the first instance, I have no doubt. I am sorry to say, this is not the worst of it. By some underhand means of which I am quite ignorant, Mr. Armadale's simplicity was imposed on — and when application was made secretly to my reference in London, it was made, Mr. Midwinter, through your friend."

Midwinter suddenly rose from his chair and looked at her. The fascination that she exercised over him, powerful as it was, became a suspended influence, now that the plain disclosure came plainly at last from her lips. He looked at her, and sat down again like a man bewildered, without uttering a word.

"Remember how weak he is," pleaded Miss Gwilt gently, "and make allowances for him as I do. The trifling accident of his failing to find my reference at the address given him seems, I can't imagine why, to have excited Mr. Armadale's suspicion. At any rate, he remained in London. What he did there, it is impossible for me to say. I was quite in the dark; I knew nothing; I distrusted nobody; I was as happy in my little round of duties as I could be with a pupil whose affections I had failed to win — when, one

morning, to my indescribable astonishment, Major Milroy showed me a correspondence between Mr. Armadale and himself. He spoke to me in his wife's presence. Poor creature, I make no complaint of her — such affliction as she suffers excuses everything. I wish I could give you some idea of the letters between Major Milroy and Mr. Armadale — but my head is only a woman's head, and I was so confused and distressed at the time! All I can tell you is, that Mr. Armadale chose to preserve silence about his proceedings in London, under circumstances which made that silence a reflection on my character. The major was most kind; his confidence in me remained unshaken — but could his confidence protect me against his wife's prejudice and his daughter's ill-will? Oh, the hardness of women to each other! Oh, the humiliation if men only knew some of us as we really are! What could I do? I couldn't defend myself against mere imputations; and I couldn't remain in my situation after a slur had been cast on me. My pride (Heaven help me, I was brought up like a gentlewoman, and I have sensibilities that are not blunted even yet!) — my pride got the better of me, and I left my place. Don't let it distress you, Mr. Midwinter! There's a bright side to the picture. The ladies in the neighbourhood have overwhelmed me with kindness; I have the prospect of getting pupils to teach; I am spared the mortification of going back to be a burden on my friends. The only complaint I have to make is I think a just one. Mr. Armadale has been back at Thorpe-Ambrose for some days. I have entreated him, by letter, to grant me an interview; to tell me what dreadful suspicions he has of me, and to let me set myself right in his estimation. Would

you believe it? he has declined to see me — under the influence of others, not of his own free will, I am sure! Cruel, isn't it? But he has even used me more cruelly still — he persists in suspecting me — it is he who is having me watched. Oh, Mr. Midwinter, don't hate me for telling you what you *must* know! The man you found persecuting me and frightening me to-night was only earning his money after all as Mr. Armadale's spy."

Once more Midwinter started to his feet; and this time the thoughts that were in him found their way into words.

"I can't believe it; I won't believe it!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "If the man told you that, the man lied. I beg your pardon, Miss Gwilt; I beg your pardon from the bottom of my heart. Don't, pray don't think I doubt *you;* I only say there is some dreadful mistake. I am not sure that I understand as I ought all that you have told me. But this last infamous meanness of which you think Allan guilty, I *do* understand. I swear to you, he is incapable of it! Some scoundrel has been taking advantage of him; some scoundrel has been using his name. I'll prove it to you if you will only give me time. Let me go and clear it up at once. I can't rest; I can't bear to think of it; I can't even enjoy the pleasure of being here. Oh," he burst out desperately, "I'm sure you feel for me, after what you have said — I feel so for *you!*"

He stopped in confusion. Miss Gwilt's eyes were looking at him again; and Miss Gwilt's hand had found its way once more into his own.

"You are the most generous of living men," she said softly; "I will believe what you tell me to believe.

Go," she added in a whisper, suddenly releasing his hand, and turning away from him. "For both our sakes, go!"

His heart beat fast; he looked at her as she dropped into a chair and put her handkerchief to her eyes. For one moment he hesitated — the next, he snatched up his knapsack from the floor, and left her precipitately, without a backward look, or a parting word.

She rose when the door closed on him. A change came over her the instant she was alone. The colour faded out of her cheeks; the beauty died out of her eyes; her face hardened horribly with a silent despair. "It's even baser work than I bargained for," she said, "to deceive *him*." After pacing to and fro in the room for some minutes, she stopped wearily before the glass over the fireplace. "You strange creature!" she murmured, leaning her elbows on the mantel-piece, and languidly addressing the reflection of herself in the glass. "Have you got any conscience left? And has that man roused it?"

The reflection of her face changed slowly. The colour returned to her cheeks, the delicious languor began to suffuse her eyes again. Her lips parted gently, and her quickening breath began to dim the surface of the glass. She drew back from it, after a moment's absorption in her own thoughts, with a start of terror. "What am I doing?" she asked herself in a sudden panic of astonishment. "Am I mad enough to be thinking of him in *that* way?"

She burst into a mocking laugh, and opened her desk on the table recklessly with a bang. "It's high

time I had some talk with mother Jezebel," she said, and sat down to write to Mrs. Oldershaw.

"I have met with Mr. Midwinter," she began, "under very lucky circumstances; and I have made the most of my opportunity. He has just left me for his friend Armadale; and one of two good things will happen to-morrow. If they don't quarrel, the doors of Thorpe-Ambrose will be opened to me again at Mr. Midwinter's intercession. If they do quarrel, I shall be the unhappy cause of it, and I shall find my way in for myself, on the purely Christian errand of reconciling them."

She hesitated at the next sentence, wrote the first few words of it, scratched them out again, and petulantly tore the letter into fragments and threw the pen to the other end of the room. Turning quickly on her chair, she looked at the seat which Midwinter had occupied; her foot restlessly tapping the floor, and her handkerchief thrust like a gag between her clenched teeth. "Young as you are," she thought, with her mind reviving the image of him in the empty chair, — "there has been something out of the common in *your* life — and I must and will know it!"

The house-clock struck the hour and roused her. She sighed, and walking back to the glass, wearily loosened the fastenings of her dress; wearily removed the studs from the chemisette beneath it, and put them on the chimney-piece. She looked indolently at the reflected beauties of her neck and bosom, as she unplaited her hair and threw it back in one great mass over her shoulders. "Fancy," she thought, "if he saw me now!" She turned back to the table, and sighed again as she extinguished one of the candles and took

the other in her hand. "Midwinter?" she said, as she passed through the folding-doors of the room to her bedchamber. "I don't believe in his name, to begin with!"

The night had advanced by more than an hour before Midwinter was back again at the great house.

Twice, well as the homeward way was known to him, he had strayed out of the right road. The events of the evening — the interview with Miss Gwilt herself, after his fortnight's solitary thinking of her; the extraordinary change that had taken place in her position since he had seen her last; and the startling assertion of Allan's connection with it — had all conspired to throw his mind into a state of ungovernable confusion. The darkness of the cloudy night added to his bewilderment. Even the familiar gates of Thorpe-Ambrose seemed strange to him. When he tried to think of it, it was a mystery to him how he had reached the place.

The front of the house was dark and closed for the night. Midwinter went round to the back. The sound of men's voices, as he advanced, caught his ear. They were soon distinguishable as the voices of the first and second footman, and the subject of conversation between them was their master.

"I'll bet you an even half-crown he's driven out of the neighbourhood before another week is over his head," said the first footman.

"Done!" said the second. "He isn't as easy driven as you think."

"Isn't he?" retorted the other. "He'll be mobbed if he stops here! I tell you again, he's not satisfied

with the mess he's got into already. I know it for certain he's having the governess watched."

At those words, Midwinter mechanically checked himself before he turned the corner of the house. His first doubt of the result of his meditated appeal to Allan ran through him like a sudden chill. The influence exercised by the voice of public scandal is a force which acts in opposition to the ordinary law of mechanics. It is strongest, not by concentration, but by distribution. To the primary sound we may shut our ears; but the reverberation of it in echoes is irresistible. On his way back, Midwinter's one desire had been to find Allan up, and to speak to him immediately. His one hope now was to gain time to contend with the new doubts and to silence the new misgivings — his one present anxiety was to hear that Allan had gone to bed. He turned the corner of the house, and presented himself before the men smoking their pipes in the back garden. As soon as their astonishment allowed them to speak, they offered to rouse their master. Allan had given his friend up for that night, and had gone to bed about half an hour since.

"It was my master's particular order, sir," said the head footman, that he was to be told of it if you came back."

"It is *my* particular request," returned Midwinter, that you won't disturb him."

The men looked at each other wonderingly, as he took his candle and left them.

CHAPTER VIII.

She comes between them.

APPOINTED hours for the various domestic events of the day were things unknown at Thorpe-Ambrose. Irregular in all his habits, Allan accommodated himself to no stated times (with the solitary exception of dinner-time) at any hour of the day or night. He retired to rest early or late, and he rose early or late, exactly as he felt inclined. The servants were forbidden to call him; and Mrs. Gripper was accustomed to improvise the breakfast as she best might, from the time when the kitchen fire was first lighted, to the time when the clock stood on the stroke of noon.

Towards nine o'clock on the morning after his return, Midwinter knocked at Allan's door; and, on entering the room, found it empty. After inquiry among the servants, it appeared that Allan had risen that morning before the man who usually attended on him was up, and that his hot water had been brought to the door by one of the housemaids, who was then still in ignorance of Midwinter's return. Nobody had chanced to see the master, either on the stairs or in the hall; nobody had heard him ring the bell for breakfast as usual. In brief, nobody knew anything about him, except what was obviously clear to all — that he was not in the house.

Midwinter went out under the great portico. He stood at the head of the flight of steps considering in which direction he should set forth to look for his friend. Allan's unexpected absence added one more

to the disquieting influences which still perplexed his mind. He was in the mood in which trifles irritate a man, and fancies are all-powerful to exalt or depress his spirits.

The sky was cloudy; and the wind blew in puffs from the south — there was every prospect, to weather-wise eyes, of coming rain. While Midwinter was still hesitating, one of the grooms passed him on the drive below. The man proved, on being questioned, to be better informed about his master's movements than the servants indoors. He had seen Allan pass the stables more than an hour since, going out by the back way into the park, with a nosegay in his hand.

A nosegay in his hand? The nosegay hung incomprehensibly on Midwinter's mind as he walked round, on the chance of meeting Allan, to the back of the house. "What does the nosegay mean?" he asked himself with an unintelligible sense of irritation, and a petulant kick at a stone that stood in his way.

It meant that Allan had been following his impulses as usual. The one pleasant impression left on his mind after his interview with Pedgift Senior, was the impression made by the lawyer's account of his conversation with Neelie in the park. The anxiety that he should not misjudge her, which the major's daughter had so earnestly expressed, placed her before Allan's eyes in an irresistibly attractive character — the character of the one person among all his neighbours who had some respect still left for his good opinion. Acutely sensible of his social isolation, now that there was no Midwinter to keep him company in

the empty house; hungering and thirsting in his solitude for a kind word and a friendly look, he began to think more and more regretfully and more and more longingly of the bright young face so pleasantly associated with his first happiest days at Thorpe-Ambrose. To be conscious of such a feeling as this, was, with a character like Allan's, to act on it headlong, lead him where it might. He had gone out on the previous morning to look for Neelie with a peace-offering of flowers, but with no very distinct idea of what he should say to her if they met; and failing to find her on the scene of her customary walks, he had characteristically persisted the next morning in making a second attempt with another peace-offering on a larger scale. Still ignorant of his friend's return, he was now at some distance from the house, searching the park in a direction which he had not tried yet.

After walking out a few hundred yards beyond the stables, and failing to discover any signs of Allan, Midwinter retraced his steps, and waited for his friend's return, pacing slowly to and fro on the little strip of garden ground at the back of the house.

From time to time, as he passed it, he looked in absently at the room which had formerly been Mrs. Armadale's, which was now (through his interposition) habitually occupied by her son — the room with the Statuette on the bracket, and the French windows opening to the ground, which had once recalled to him the Second Vision of the Dream. The Shadow of the Man, which Allan had seen standing opposite to him at the long window; the view over a lawn and flower-garden; the pattering of the rain against the glass; the stretching out of the Shadow's arm, and

the fall of the statue in fragments on the floor — these objects and events of the visionary scene, so vividly present to his memory once, were all superseded by later remembrances now, were all left to fade as they might in the dim background of time. He could pass the room again and again, alone and anxious, and never once think of the boat drifting away in the moonlight, and the night's imprisonment on the Wrecked Ship!

Towards ten o'clock the well-remembered sound of Allan's voice became suddenly audible in the direction of the stables. In a moment more he was visible from the garden. His second morning's search for Neelie had ended to all appearance in a second defeat of his object. The nosegay was still in his hand; and he was resignedly making a present of it to one of the coachman's children.

Midwinter impulsively took a step forward towards the stables, and abruptly checked his further progress.

Conscious that his position towards his friend was altered already in relation to Miss Gwilt, the first sight of Allan filled his mind with a sudden distrust of the governess's influence over him, which was almost a distrust of himself. He knew that he had set forth from the moors on his return to Thorpe-Ambrose with the resolution of acknowledging the passion that had mastered him, and of insisting, if necessary, on a second and a longer absence in the interests of the sacrifice which he was bent on making to the happiness of his friend. What had become of that resolution now? The discovery of Miss Gwilt's altered position, and the declaration that she had

voluntarily made of her indifference to Allan, had scattered it to the winds. The first words with which he would have met his friend, if nothing had happened to him on the homeward way, were words already dismissed from his lips. He drew back as he felt it, and struggled with an instinctive loyalty towards Allan, to free himself at the last moment from the influence of Miss Gwilt.

Having disposed of his useless nosegay, Allan passed on into the garden, and the instant he entered it, recognized Midwinter with a loud cry of surprise and delight.

"Am I awake or dreaming?" he exclaimed, seizing his friend excitably by both hands. "You dear old Midwinter, have you sprung up out of the ground, or have you dropped from the clouds?"

It was not till Midwinter had explained the mystery of his unexpected appearance in every particular, that Allan could be prevailed on to say a word about himself. When he did speak, he shook his head ruefully, and subdued the hearty loudness of his voice, with a preliminary look round to see if the servants were within hearing.

"I've learnt to be cautious since you went away and left me," said Allan. "My dear fellow, you haven't the least notion what things have happened, and what an awful scrape I'm in at this very moment!"

"You are mistaken, Allan. I have heard more of what has happened than you suppose."

"What! the dreadful mess I'm in with Miss Gwilt? the row with the major? the infernal scandal-mongering in the neighbourhood? You don't mean to say —?"

"Yes," interposed Midwinter quietly, "I have heard of it all."

"Good heavens! how? Did you stop at Thorpe-Ambrose on your way back? Have you been in the coffee-room at the hotel? Have you met Pedgift? Have you dropped into the Reading Rooms, and seen what they call the freedom of the press in the town newspaper?"

Midwinter paused before he answered, and looked up at the sky. The clouds had been gathering unnoticed over their heads, and the first rain-drops were beginning to fall.

"Come in here," said Allan. "We'll go up to breakfast this way." He led Midwinter through the open French window into his own sitting-room. The wind blew towards that side of the house, and the rain followed them in. Midwinter, who was last, turned and closed the window."

Allan was too eager for the answer which the weather had interrupted, to wait for it till they reached the breakfast-room. He stopped close at the window, and added two more to his string of questions.

"How can you possibly have heard about me and Miss Gwilt?" he asked. "Who told you?"

"Miss Gwilt herself," replied Midwinter gravely.

Allan's manner changed the moment the governess's name passed his friend's lips.

"I wish you had heard my story first," he said. "Where did you meet with Miss Gwilt?"

There was a momentary pause. They both stood still at the window, absorbed in the interest of the moment. They both forgot that their contemplated

place of shelter from the rain had been the breakfast-room upstairs.

"Before I answer your question," said Midwinter a little constrainedly, "I want to ask you something, Allan, on my side. Is it really true that you are in some way concerned in Miss Gwilt's leaving Major Milroy's service?"

There was another pause. The disturbance which had begun to appear in Allan's manner palpably increased.

"It's rather a long story," he began. "I have been taken in, Midwinter. I've been imposed on by a person, who — I can't help saying it — who cheated me into promising what I oughtn't to have promised, and doing what I had better not have done. It isn't breaking my promise to tell *you*. I can trust in your discretion, can't I? You will never say a word, will you?"

"Stop!" said Midwinter. "Don't trust me with any secrets which are not your own. If you have given a promise, don't trifle with it, even in speaking to such an intimate friend as I am." He laid his hand gently and kindly on Allan's shoulder. "I can't help seeing that I have made you a little uncomfortable," he went on. "I can't help seeing that my question is not so easy a one to answer as I had hoped and supposed. Shall we wait a little? shall we go upstairs and breakfast first?"

Allan was far too earnestly bent on presenting his conduct to his friend in the right aspect, to heed Midwinter's suggestion. He spoke eagerly on the instant, without moving from the window.

"My dear fellow, it's a perfectly easy question to

answer. Only —" He hesitated. "Only it requires what I'm a bad hand at — it requires an explanation."

"Do you mean," asked Midwinter more seriously, but not less gently than before, "that you must first justify yourself, and then answer my question?"

"That's it!" said Allan, with an air of relief. "You've hit the right nail on the head, just as usual."

Midwinter's face darkened for the first time. "I am sorry to hear it," he said; his voice sinking low, and his eyes dropping to the ground as he spoke.

The rain was beginning to fall thickly. It swept across the garden, straight on the closed windows, and pattered heavily against the glass.

"Sorry!" repeated Allan. "My dear fellow, you haven't heard the particulars yet. Wait till I explain the thing first."

"You are a bad hand at explanations," said Midwinter, repeating Allan's own words. "Don't place yourself at a disadvantage. Don't explain it."

Allan looked at him, in silent perplexity and surprise.

"You are my friend — my best and dearest friend," Midwinter went on. "I can't bear to let you justify yourself to me as if I was your judge, or as if I doubted you." He looked up again at Allan frankly and kindly as he said those words. "Besides," he resumed, "I think if I look into my memory, I can anticipate your explanation. We had a moment's talk, before I went away, about some very delicate questions, which you proposed putting to Major Milroy. I remember I warned you; I remember I had my misgivings. Should I be guessing right if I guessed that

those questions have been in some way the means of leading you into a false position? If it is true that you have been concerned in Miss Gwilt's leaving her situation, is it also true — is it only doing you justice to believe — that any mischief for which you are responsible, has been mischief innocently done?"

"Yes," said Allan, speaking for the first time, a little constrainedly on his side. "It is only doing me justice to say that." He stopped and began drawing lines absently with his finger on the blurred surface of the window-pane. "You're not like other people, Midwinter," he resumed suddenly, with an effort; "and I should have liked you to have heard the particulars all the same."

"I will hear them if you desire it," returned Midwinter. "But I am satisfied without another word, that you have not willingly been the means of depriving Miss Gwilt of her situation. If that is understood between you and me, I think we need say no more. Besides, I have another question to ask, of much greater importance: a question that has been forced on me by what I saw with my own eyes, and heard with my own ears, last night."

He stopped, recoiling in spite of himself. "Shall we go upstairs first?" he asked abruptly, leading the way to the door, and trying to gain time.

It was useless. Once again, the room which they were both free to leave, the room which one of them had twice tried to leave already, held them as if they were prisoners.

Without answering, without even appearing to have heard Midwinter's proposal to go upstairs, Allan followed him mechanically as far as the opposite side of

the window. There he stopped. "Midwinter!" he burst out, in a sudden panic of astonishment and alarm, "there seems so be something strange between us! you're not like yourself. What is it?"

With his hand on the lock of the door, Midwinter turned, and looked back into the room. The moment had come. His haunting fear of doing his friend an injustice had shown itself in a restraint of word, look, and action, which had been marked enough to force its way to Allan's notice. The one course left now, in the dearest interest of the friendship that united them, was to speak at once, and to speak boldly.

"There's something strange between us," reiterated Allan. "For God's sake what is it?"

Midwinter took his hand from the door, and came down again to the window, fronting Allan. He occupied the place, of necessity, which Allan had just left. It was the side of the window on which the Statuette stood. The little figure, placed on its projecting bracket, was close behind him on his right hand. No signs of change appeared in the stormy sky. The rain still swept slanting across the garden, and pattered heavily against the glass.

"Give me your hand, Allan."

Allan gave it, and Midwinter held it firmly while he spoke.

"There *is* something strange between us," he said. "There is something to be set right which touches you nearly; and it has not been set right yet. You asked me just now where I met with Miss Gwilt. I met with her on my way back here, upon the high road on the farther side of the town. She entreated me to protect her from a man who was following, and frightening

her. I saw the scoundrel with my own eyes, and I should have laid hands on him, if Miss Gwilt herself had not stopped me. She gave a very strange reason for stopping me. She said I didn't know who his employer was."

Allan's ruddy colour suddenly deepened; he looked aside quickly through the window at the pouring rain. At the same moment their hands fell apart, and there was a pause of silence on either side. Midwinter was the first to speak again.

"Later in the evening," he went on, "Miss Gwilt explained herself. She told me two things. She declared that the man whom I had seen following her was a hired spy. I was surprised, but I could not dispute it. She told me next, Allan — what I believe with my whole heart and soul to be a falsehood which has been imposed on her as the truth — she told me that the spy was in *your* employment!"

Allan turned instantly from the window, and looked Midwinter full in the face again. "I *must* explain myself this time," he said resolutely.

The ashy paleness, peculiar to him in moments of strong emotion, began to show itself on Midwinter's cheeks.

"More explanations!" he said, and drew back a step, with his eyes fixed in a sudden terror of inquiry on Allan's face.

"You don't know what I know, Midwinter. You don't know that what I have done has been done with a good reason. And what is more, I have not trusted to myself — I have had good advice."

"Did you hear what I said just now?" asked Mid-

winter, incredulously; "you can't — surely, you can't have been attending to me?"

"I haven't missed a word," rejoined Allan. "I tell you again, you don't know what I know of Miss Gwilt. She has threatened Miss Milroy. Miss Milroy is in danger while her governess stops in this neighbourhood."

Midwinter dismissed the major's daughter from the conversation with a contemptuous gesture of his hand.

"I don't want to hear about Miss Milroy," he said. "Don't mix up Miss Milroy —— Good God, Allan, am I to understand that the spy set to watch Miss Gwilt was doing his vile work with your approval?"

"Once for all, my dear fellow, will you, or will you not, let me explain?"

"Explain!" cried Midwinter, his eyes aflame, and his hot Creole blood rushing crimson into his face. "Explain the employment of a spy? What! after having driven Miss Gwilt out of her situation, by meddling with her private affairs, you meddle again, by the vilest of all means — the means of a paid spy? You set a watch on the woman whom you yourself told me you loved, only a fortnight since! the woman you were thinking of as your wife! I don't believe it; I won't believe it. Is my head failing me? Is it Allan Armadale I am speaking to? Is it Allan Armadale's face looking at me? Stop! you are acting under some mistaken scruple. Some low fellow has crept into your confidence, and has done this in your name without telling you first."

Allan controlled himself with admirable patience and admirable consideration for the temper of his friend. "If you persist in refusing to hear me," he

said, "I must wait as well as I can till my turn comes."

"Tell me you are a stranger to the employment of that man, and I will hear you willingly."

"Suppose there should be a necessity, that you know nothing about, for employing him?"

"I acknowledge no necessity for the cowardly persecution of a helpless woman."

A momentary flush of irritation — momentary and, no more — passed over Allan's face. "You mightn't think her quite so helpless," he said, "if you knew the truth."

"Are *you* the man to tell me the truth?" retorted the other. "You who have refused to hear her in her own defence! You, who have closed the doors of this house against her!"

Allan still controlled himself, but the effort began at last to be visible.

"I know your temper is a hot one," he said. "But for all that, your violence quite takes me by surprise. I can't account for it, unless ——" he hesitated a moment, and then finished the sentence in his usual frank, outspoken way — "unless you are sweet yourself on Miss Gwilt."

Those last words heaped fuel on the fire. They stripped the truth instantly of all concealments and disguises, and laid it bare to view. Allan's instinct had guessed, and the guiding influence stood revealed of Midwinter's interest in Miss Gwilt.

"What right have you to say that?" he asked, with raised voice and threatening eyes.

"I told *you*," said Allan, simply, "when I thought I was sweet on her myself. Come! come! it's a little

hard, I think, even if you *are* in love with her, to believe everything she tells you, and not to let me say a word. Is *that* the way you decide between us?"

"Yes, it is!" cried the other, infuriated by Allan's second allusion to Miss Gwilt. "When I am asked to choose between the employer of a spy, and the victim of a spy, I side with the victim!"

"Don't try me too hard, Midwinter; I have a temper to lose as well as you."

He stopped, struggling with himself. The torture of passion in Midwinter's face, from which a less simple and less generous nature might have recoiled in horror, touched Allan suddenly with an artless distress, which, at that moment, was little less than sublime. He advanced, with his eyes moistening, and his hand held out. "You asked me for my hand just now," he said, "and I gave it you. Will you remember old times, and give me yours, before it's too late?"

"No!" retorted Midwinter, furiously. "I may meet Miss Gwilt again, and I may want my hand free to deal with your spy!"

He had drawn back along the wall, as Allan advanced, until the bracket which supported the Statuette was before instead of behind him. In the madness of his passion, he saw nothing but Allan's face confronting him. In the madness of his passion, he stretched out his right hand as he answered and shook it threateningly in the air. It struck the forgotten projection of the bracket — and the next instant the Statuette lay in fragments on the floor.

The rain drove slanting over flower-bed and lawn, and pattered heavily against the glass; and the two

Armadales stood by the window, as the two Shadows had stood in the second Vision of the Dream, with the wreck of the image between them.

Allan stooped over the fragments of the little figure, and lifted them one by one from the floor. "Leave me," he said, without looking up, "or we shall both repent it."

Without a word, Midwinter moved back slowly. He stood for the second time with his hand on the door, and looked his last at the room. The horror of the night on the Wreck had got him once more, and the flame of his passion was quenched in an instant.

"The Dream!" he whispered, under his breath. "The Dream again!"

The door was tried from the outside, and a servant appeared with a trivial message about the breakfast.

Midwinter looked at the man with a blank, dreadful helplessness in his face. "Show me the way out," he said. "The place is dark, and the room turns round with me."

The servant took him by the arm, and silently led him out.

As the door closed on them, Allan picked up the last fragment of the broken figure. He sat down alone at the table, and hid his face in his hands. The self-control which he had bravely preserved under exasperation renewed again and again, now failed him at last in the friendless solitude of his room; and in the first bitterness of feeling that Midwinter had turned against him like the rest, he burst into tears.

The moments followed each other, the slow time wore on. Little by little the signs of a new elemental disturbance began to show themselves in the summer

storm. The shadow of a swiftly-deepening darkness swept over the sky. The pattering of the rain lessened with the lessening wind. There was a momentary hush of stillness. Then on a sudden, the rain poured down again like a cataract, and the low roll of thunder came up solemnly on the dying air.

CHAPTER IX.

She knows the Truth.

1. — *From Mr. Bashwood to Miss Gwilt.*

"Thorpe-Ambrose, July 20th, 1851.

"DEAR MADAM — I received yesterday, by private messenger, your obliging note, in which you direct me to communicate with you, through the post only, as long as there is reason to believe that any visitors who may come to you are likely to be observed. May I be permitted to say, that I look forward with respectful anxiety to the time when I shall again enjoy the only real happiness I have ever experienced — the happiness of personally addressing you?

"In compliance with your desire that I should not allow this day (the Sunday) to pass without privately noticing what went on at the great house, I took the keys, and went this morning to the steward's office. I accounted for my appearance to the servants, by informing them that I had work to do which it was important to complete in the shortest possible time. The same excuse would have done for Mr. Armadale, if we had met, but no such meeting happened.

"Although I was at Thorpe-Ambrose, in what I thought good time, I was too late to see or hear any-

thing myself of a serious quarrel which appeared to have taken place, just before I arrived, between Mr. Armadale and Mr. Midwinter.

"All the little information I can give you in this matter is derived from one of the servants. The man told me that he heard the voices of the two gentlemen loud, in Mr. Armadale's sitting-room. He went in to announce breakfast shortly afterwards, and found Mr. Midwinter in such a dreadful state of agitation, that he had to be helped out of the room. The servant tried to take him upstairs to lie down and compose himself. He declined, saying he would wait a little first in one of the lower rooms, and begging that he might be left alone. The man had hardly got downstairs again, when he heard the front door opened and closed. He ran back, and found that Mr. Midwinter was gone. The rain was pouring at the time, and thunder and lightning came soon afterwards. Dreadful weather certainly, to go out in. The servant thinks Mr. Midwinter's mind was unsettled. I sincerely hope not. Mr. Midwinter is one of the few people I have met with in the course of my life who have treated me kindly.

"Hearing that Mr. Armadale still remained in his sitting-room, I went into the steward's office (which, as you may remember, is on the same side of the house), and left the door ajar, and set the window open, waiting and listening for anything that might happen. Dear madam, there was a time when I might have thought such a position in the house of my employer not a very becoming one. Let me hasten to assure you that this is far from being my feeling now. I glory in any position which makes me serviceable to you.

"The state of the weather seemed hopelessly adverse to that renewal of intercourse between Mr. Armadale and Miss Milroy, which you so confidently anticipate, and of which you are so anxious to be made aware. Strangely enough, however, it is actually in consequence of the state of the weather, that I am now in a position to give you the very information you require. Mr. Armadale and Miss Milroy met about an hour since. The circumstances were as follows: —

"Just at the beginning of the thunderstorm, I saw one of the grooms run across from the stables, and heard him tap at his master's window. Mr. Armadale opened the window and asked what was the matter. The groom said he came with a message from the coachman's wife. She had seen from her room over the stables (which looks on to the park,) Miss Milroy quite alone, standing for shelter under one of the trees. As that part of the park was at some distance from the major's cottage, she had thought that her master might wish to send and ask the young lady into the house — especially as she had placed herself, with a thunderstorm coming on, in what might turn out to be a very dangerous position.

"The moment Mr. Armadale understood the man's message, he called for the waterproof things and the umbrellas, and ran out himself, instead of leaving it to the servants. In a little time, he and the groom came back with Miss Milroy between them, as well protected as could be from the rain.

"I ascertained from one of the women-servants, who had taken the young lady into a bedroom, and had supplied her with such dry things as she wanted,

that Miss Milroy had been afterwards shown into the drawing-room, and that Mr. Armadale was there with her. The only way of following your instructions, and finding out what passed between them, was to go round the house in the pelting rain, and get into the conservatory (which opens into the drawing-room) by the outer door. I hesitate at nothing, dear madam, in your service; I would cheerfully get wet every day, to please you. Besides, though I may at first sight be thought rather an elderly man, a wetting is of no very serious consequence to me. I assure you I am not so old as I look, and I am of a stronger constitution than appears.

"It was impossible for me to get near enough in the conservatory to see what went on in the drawing-room, without the risk of being discovered. But most of the conversation reached me, except when they dropped their voices. This is the substance of what I heard: —

"I gathered that Miss Milroy had been prevailed on, against her will, to take refuge from the thunderstorm in Mr. Armadale's house. She said so at least, and she gave two reasons. The first was, that her father had forbidden all intercourse between the cottage and the great house. Mr. Armadale met this objection by declaring that her father had issued his orders under a total misconception of the truth, and by entreating her not to treat him as cruelly as the major had treated him. He entered, I suspect, into some explanations at this point, but as he dropped his voice, I am unable to say what they were. His language, when I did hear it, was confused and ungrammatical. It seemed, however, to be quite intelligible enough to

persuade Miss Milroy that her father had been acting under a mistaken impression of the circumstances. At least, I infer this; for, when I next heard the conversation, the young lady was driven back to her second objection to being in the house — which was, that Mr. Armadale had behaved very badly to her, and that he richly deserved that she should never speak to him again.

"In this latter case, Mr. Armadale attempted no defence of any kind. He agreed with her that he had behaved badly; he agreed with her that he richly deserved she should never speak to him again. At the same time he implored her to remember that he had suffered his punishment already. He was disgraced in the neighbourhood; and his dearest friend, his one intimate friend in the world, had that very morning turned against him like the rest. Far or near, there was not a living creature whom he was fond of, to comfort him, or to say a friendly word to him. He was lonely and miserable, and his heart ached for a little kindness — and that was his only excuse for asking Miss Milroy to forget and forgive the past.

"I must leave you, I fear, to judge for yourself of the effect of this on the young lady; for though I tried hard, I failed to catch what she said. I am almost certain I heard her crying, and Mr. Armadale entreating her not to break his heart. They whispered a great deal, which aggravated me. I was afterwards alarmed by Mr. Armadale coming out into the conservatory to pick some flowers. He did not come as far, fortunately, as the place where I was hidden; and he went in again into the drawing-room, and there was more talking (I suspect at close quarters), which to my

great regret I again failed to catch. Pray forgive me for having so little to tell you. I can only add, that when the storm cleared off, Miss Milroy went away with the flowers in her hand, and with Mr. Armadale escorting her from the house. My own humble opinion is that he had a powerful friend at court, all through the interview, in the young lady's own liking for him.

"This is all I can say at present, with the exception of one other thing I heard, which I blush to mention. But your word is law, and you have ordered me to have no concealments from you.

"Their talk turned once, dear madam, on yourself. I think I heard the word 'Creature' from Miss Milroy; and I am certain that Mr. Armadale, while acknowledging that he had once admired you, added that circumstances had since satisfied him of 'his folly.' I quote his own expression — it made me quite tremble with indignation. If I may be permitted to say so, the man who admires Miss Gwilt lives in paradise. Respect, if nothing else, ought to have closed Mr. Armadale's lips. He is my employer, I know — but, after his calling it an act of folly to admire you (though I *am* his deputy-steward), I utterly despise him.

"Trusting that I may have been so happy as to give you satisfaction thus far, and earnestly desirous to deserve the honour of your continued confidence in me, I remain, dear madam,

"Your grateful and devoted servant,

"FELIX BASHWOOD."

2. — *From Mrs. Oldershaw to Miss Gwilt.*

"Diana Street, Monday, July 21st.

"My dear Lydia, — I trouble you with a few lines. They are written under a sense of the duty which I owe to myself, in our present position towards each other.

"I am not at all satisfied with the tone of your two last letters; and I am still less pleased at your leaving me this morning without any letter at all — and this when we had arranged, in the doubtful state of our prospects, that I was to hear from you every day. I can only interpret your conduct in one way. I can only infer that matters at Thorpe-Ambrose, having been all mismanaged, are all going wrong.

"It is not my present object to reproach you, for why should I waste time, language, and paper? I merely wish to recall to your memory certain considerations which you appear to be disposed to overlook. Shall I put them in the plainest English? Yes — for with all my faults, I am frankness personified.

"In the first place, then, I have an interest in your becoming Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose as well as you. Secondly, I have provided you (to say nothing of good advice) with all the money needed to accomplish our object. Thirdly, I hold your notes-of-hand, at short dates, for every farthing so advanced. Fourthly and lastly, though I am indulgent to a fault in the capacity of a friend — in the capacity of a woman of business, my dear, I am not to be trifled with. That is all, Lydia, at least for the present.

"Pray don't suppose I write in anger; I am only

sorry and disheartened. My state of mind resembles David's. If I had the wings of a dove, I would flee away and be at rest.

"Affectionately yours,

"MARIA OLDERSHAW."

3. — *From Mr. Bashwood to Miss Gwilt.*

"Thorpe-Ambrose, July 21st.

"DEAR MADAM, — You will probably receive these lines a few hours after my yesterday's communication reaches you. I posted my first letter last night, and I shall post this before noon to-day.

"My present object in writing is to give you some more news from this house. I have the inexpressible happiness of announcing that Mr. Armadale's disgraceful intrusion on your privacy is at an end. The watch set on your actions is to be withdrawn this day. I write, dear madam, with the tears in my eyes — tears of joy, caused by feelings which I ventured to express in my previous letter (see first paragraph towards the end). Pardon me this personal reference. I can speak to you (I don't know why) so much more readily with my pen than with my tongue.

"Let me try to compose myself, and proceed with my narrative.

"I had just arrived at the steward's office this morning, when Mr. Pedgift the elder followed me to the great house to see Mr. Armadale by special appointment. It is needless to say that I at once suspended any little business there was to do, feeling that your interests might possibly be concerned. It is also most gratifying to add that this time circumstances favoured

me. I was able to stand under the open window, and to hear the whole interview.

"Mr. Armadale explained himself at once in the plainest terms. He gave orders that the person who had been hired to watch you should be instantly dismissed. On being asked to explain this sudden change of purpose, he did not conceal that it was owing to the effect produced on his mind by what had passed between Mr. Midwinter and himself on the previous day. Mr. Midwinter's language, cruelly unjust as it was, had nevertheless convinced him that no necessity whatever could excuse any proceeding so essentially base in itself as the employment of a spy, and on that conviction he was now determined to act.

"But for your own positive directions to me to conceal nothing that passes here in which your name is concerned, I should really be ashamed to report what Mr. Pedgift said on his side. He has behaved kindly to me, I know. But if he was my own brother, I could never forgive him the tone in which he spoke of you, and the obstinacy with which he tried to make Mr. Armadale change his mind.

"He began by attacking Mr. Midwinter. He declared that Mr. Midwinter's opinion was the very worst opinion that could be taken; for it was quite plain that you, dear madam, had twisted him round your finger. Producing no effect by this coarse suggestion (which nobody who knows you could for a moment believe), Mr. Pedgift next referred to Miss Milroy, and asked Mr. Armadale if he had given up all idea of protecting her. What this meant I cannot imagine. I can only report it for your private consideration. Mr. Armadale briefly answered that he had his own plan for pro-

tecting Miss Milroy, and that the circumstances were altered in that quarter, or words to a similar effect. Still Mr. Pedgift persisted. He went on (I blush to mention) from bad to worse. He tried to persuade Mr. Armadale next to bring an action at law against one or other of the persons who had been most strongly condemning his conduct in the neighbourhood, for the purpose — I really hardly know how to write it — of getting you into the witness-box. And worse yet: when Mr. Armadale still said No, Mr. Pedgift, after having, as I suspected by the sound of his voice, been on the point of leaving the room, artfully came back, and proposed sending for a detective officer from London, simply to look at you. 'The whole of this mystery about Miss Gwilt's true character,' he said, 'may turn on a question of identity. It won't cost much to have a man down from London; and it's worth trying whether her face is or is not known at head-quarters to the police.' I again and again assure you, dearest lady, that I only repeat those abominable words from a sense of duty towards yourself. I shook — I declare I shook from head to foot when I heard them.

"To resume, for there is more to tell you.

"Mr. Armadale (to his credit — I don't deny it, though I don't like him) still said No. He appeared to be getting irritated under Mr. Pegift's persistence, and he spoke in a somewhat hasty way. 'You persuaded me on the last occasion when we talked about this,' he said, 'to do something that I have been since heartily ashamed of. You won't succeed in persuading me, Mr. Pedgift, a second time.' Those were his

words. Mr. Pedgift took him up short; Mr. Pedgift seemed to be nettled on his side.

"'If that is the light in which you see my advice, sir,' he said, 'the less you have of it for the future, the better. Your character and position are publicly involved in this matter between yourself and Miss Gwilt; and you persist, at a most critical moment, in taking a course of your own, which I believe will end badly. After what I have already said and done in this very serious case, I can't consent to go on with it with both my hands tied; and I can't drop it with credit to myself, while I remain publicly known as your solicitor. You leave me no alternative, sir, but to resign the honour of acting as your legal adviser.' 'I am sorry to hear it,' says Mr. Armadale, 'but I have suffered enough already through interfering with Miss Gwilt. I can't and won't stir any further in the matter.' '*You* may not stir any further in it, sir,' says Mr. Pedgift, 'and *I* shall not stir any further in it, for it has ceased to be a question of professional interest to me. But mark my words, Mr. Armadale, you are not at the end of this business yet. Some other person's curiosity may go on from the point where you (and I) have stopped; and some other person's hand may let the broad daylight in yet on Miss Gwilt.'

"I report their language, dear madam, almost word for word, I believe, as I heard it. It produced an indescribable impression on me; it filled me, I hardly know why, with quite a panic of alarm. I don't at all understand it, and I understand still less what happened immediately afterwards.

"Mr. Pedgift's voice, when he said those last words, sounded dreadfully close to me. He must have

been speaking at the open window, and he must, I fear, have seen me under it. I had time, before he left the house, to get out quietly from among the laurels, but not to get back to the office. Accordingly I walked away along the drive towards the lodge, as if I was going on some errand connected with the steward's business.

"Before long, Mr. Pedgift overtook me in his gig, and stopped. 'So *you* feel some curiosity about Miss Gwilt, do you?' he said. 'Gratify your curiosity by all means — *I* don't object to it.' I felt naturally nervous, but I managed to ask him what he meant. He didn't answer; he only looked down at me from the gig in a very odd manner, and laughed. 'I have known stranger things happen even than *that!*' he said to himself suddenly, and drove off.

"I have ventured to trouble you with this last incident, though it may seem of no importance in your eyes, in the hope that your superior ability may be able to explain it. My own poor faculties, I confess, are quite unable to penetrate Mr. Pedgift's meaning. All I know is, that he has no right to accuse me of any such impertinent feeling as curiosity in relation to a lady whom I ardently esteem and admire. I dare not put it in warmer words.

"I have only to add that I am in a position to be of continued service to you here if you wish it. Mr. Armadale has just been into the office, and has told me briefly that, in Mr. Midwinter's continued absence, I am still to act as steward's deputy till further notice. Believe me, dear madam, anxiously and devotedly yours,

"FELIX BASHWOOD."

4. — *From Allan Armadale to the Rev. Decimus Brock.*

"Thorpe-Ambrose, Tuesday.

"My dear Mr. Brock, — I am in sad trouble. Midwinter has quarrelled with me and left me; and my lawyer has quarrelled with me and left me; and (except dear little Miss Milroy, who has forgiven me) all the neighbours have turned their backs on me. There is a good deal about '*me*' in this, but I can't help it. I am very miserable alone in my own house. Do pray come and see me! You are the only old friend I have left, and I do long so to tell you about it. N.B. — On my word of honour as a gentleman, I am not to blame. Yours affectionately,

"Allan Armadale."

"P.S. — I would come to you (for this place is grown quite hateful to me), but I have a reason for not going too far away from Miss Milroy just at present."

5. — *From Robert Stapleton to Allan Armadale, Esq.*

"Boscombe Rectory, Thursday Morning.

"Respected Sir, — I see a letter in your writing, on the table along with the others, which I am sorry to say my master is not well enough to open. He is down with a sort of low fever. The doctor says it has been brought on with worry and anxiety, which master was not strong enough to bear. This seems likely; for I was with him when he went to London last month, and what with his own business, and the business of looking after that person who afterwards gave us the

slip, he was worried and anxious all the time; and for the matter of that, so was I.

"My master was talking of you a day or two since. He seemed unwilling that you should know of his illness, unless he got worse. But I think you ought to know of it. At the same time he is not worse — perhaps a trifle better. The doctor says he must be kept very quiet, and not agitated on any account. So be pleased to take no notice of this — I mean in the way of coming to the rectory. I have the doctor's orders to say it is not needful, and it would only upset my master in the state he is in now.

"I will write again if you wish it. Please accept of my duty, and believe me to remain, sir, your humble servant,

"Robert Stapleton.

"P.S. — The yacht has been rigged and repainted, waiting your orders. She looks beautiful."

6. — *From Mrs. Oldershaw to Miss Gwilt.*

"Diana Street, July 24th.

"Miss Gwilt, — The post-hour has passed for three mornings following, and has brought me no answer to my letter. Are you purposely bent on insulting me? or have you left Thorpe-Ambrose? In either case, I won't put up with your conduct any longer. The law shall bring you to book, if I can't.

"Your first note-of-hand (for thirty pounds) falls due on Tuesday next, the 29th. If you had behaved with common consideration towards me, I would have let you renew it with pleasure. As things are, I shall

have the note presented; and, if it is not paid, I shall instruct my man of business to take the usual course.

"Yours,
"MARIA OLDERSHAW."

7. — *From Miss Gwilt to Mrs. Oldershaw.*

"5, Paradise Place, Thorpe-Ambrose, July 25th.

"MRS. OLDERSHAW, — The time of your man of business being, no doubt, of some value, I write a line to assist him when he takes the usual course. He will find me waiting to be arrested in the first-floor apartments, at the above address. In my present situation, and with my present thoughts, the best service you can possibly render me is to lock me up.

"L. G."

8. — *From Mrs. Oldershaw to Miss Gwilt.*

"Diana Street, July 26th.

"MY DARLING LYDIA, — The longer I live in this wicked world the more plainly I see that women's own tempers are the worst enemies women have to contend with. What a truly regretful style of correspondence we have fallen into! What a sad want of self-restraint, my dear, on your side and on mine!

"Let me, as the oldest in years, be the first to make the needful excuses, the first to blush for my own want of self-control. Your cruel neglect, Lydia, stung me into writing as I did. I am so sensitive to ill-treatment, when it is inflicted on me by a person whom I love and admire — and, though turned sixty,

I am still (unfortunately for myself) so young at heart. Accept my apologies for having made use of my pen when I ought to have been content to take refuge in my pocket-handkerchief. Forgive your attached Maria for being still young at heart!

"But oh, my dear — though I own I threatened you — how hard of you to take me at my word! How cruel of you, if your debt had been ten times what it is, to suppose me capable (whatever I might say) of the odious inhumanity of arresting my bosom friend! Heavens! have I deserved to be taken at my word in this unmercifully exact way, after the years of tender intimacy that have united us? But I don't complain; I only mourn over the frailty of our common human nature. Let us expect as little of each other as possible, my dear; we are both women, and we can't help it. I declare, when I reflect on the origin of our unfortunate sex — when I remember that we were all originally made of no better material than the rib of a man (and that rib of so little importance to its possessor that he never appears to have missed it afterwards), I am quite astonished at our virtues, and not in the least surprised at our faults.

"I am wandering a little; I am losing myself in serious thought, like that sweet character in Shakspeare who was 'fancy free.' One last word, dearest, to say that my longing for an answer to this proceeds entirely from my wish to hear from you again in your old friendly tone, and is quite unconnected with any curiosity to know what you are doing at Thorpe-Ambrose — except such curiosity as you yourself might approve. Need I add that I beg you as a favour to *me*, to renew, on the customary terms? I refer to the little bill

due on Tuesday next, and I venture to suggest that day six weeks.

"Yours, with a truly motherly feeling,

"MARIA OLDERSHAW."

9. — *From Miss Gwilt to Mrs. Oldershaw.*

"Paradise Place, July 27th.

"I HAVE just got your last letter. The brazen impudence of it has roused me. I am to be treated like a child, am I? — to be threatened first, and then, if threatening fails, to be coaxed afterwards? You *shall* coax me; you shall know, my motherly friend, the sort of child you have to deal with.

"I had a reason, Mrs. Oldershaw, for the silence which has so seriously offended you. I was afraid — actually afraid — to let you into the secret of my thoughts. No such fear troubles me now. My only anxiety this morning is to make you my best acknowledgments for the manner in which you have written to me. After carefully considering it, I think the worst turn I can possibly do you, is to tell you what you are burning to know. So here I am at my desk, bent on telling it. If you don't bitterly repent, when you are at the end of this letter, not having held to your first resolution, and locked me up out of harm's way while you had the chance, my name is not Lydia Gwilt.

"Where did my last letter end? I don't remember, and don't care. Make it out as you can — I am not going back any further than this day week. That is to say, Sunday last.

"There was a thunderstorm in the morning. It

began to clear off towards noon. I didn't go out — I waited to see Midwinter or to hear from him. (Are you surprised at my not writing 'Mr.' before his name? We have got so familiar, my dear, that 'Mr.' would be quite out of place.) He had left me the evening before, under very interesting circumstances. I had told him that his friend, Armadale, was persecuting me by means of a hired spy. He had declined to believe it, and had gone straight to Thorpe-Ambrose to clear the thing up. I let him kiss my hand before he went. He promised to come back the next day (the Sunday). I felt I had secured my influence over him; and I believed he would keep his word.

"Well, the thunder passed away as I told you. The weather cleared up; the people walked out in their best clothes; the dinners came in from the bakers; I sat dreaming at my wretched little hired piano, nicely dressed and looking my best — and still no Midwinter appeared. It was late in the afternoon, and I was beginning to feel offended, when a letter was brought to me. It had been left by a strange messenger who went away again immediately. I looked at the letter. Midwinter at last — in writing, instead of in person. I began to feel more offended than ever — for, as I told you, I thought I had used my influence over him to better purpose.

"The letter, when I read it, set my mind off in a new direction. It surprised, it puzzled, it interested me. I thought, and thought, and thought of him, all the rest of the day.

"He began by asking my pardon for having doubted what I told him. Mr. Armadale's own lips had confirmed me. They had quarrelled (as I had anticipated

they would) — and he, and the man who had once been his dearest friend on earth, had parted for ever. So far, I was not surprised. I was amused by his telling me in his extravagant way that he and his friend were parted for ever; and I rather wondered what he would think when I carried out my plan, and found my way into the great house on pretence of reconciling them.

"But the second part of the letter set me thinking. Here it is, in his own words.

"'It is only by struggling against myself (and no language can say how hard the struggle has been) that I have decided on writing, instead of speaking to you. A merciless necessity claims my future life. I must leave Thorpe-Ambrose, I must leave England, without hesitating, without stopping to look back. There are reasons — terrible reasons, which I have madly trifled with — for my never letting Mr. Armadale set eyes on me, or hear of me again, after what has happened between us. I must go, never more to live under the same roof, never more to breathe the same air with that man. I must hide myself from him, under an assumed name; I must put the mountains and the seas between us. I have been warned as no human creature was ever warned before. I believe — I dare not tell you why — I believe that if the fascination you have for me draws me back to you, fatal consequences will come of it to the man whose life has been so strangely mingled with your life and mine — the man who was once *your* admirer and *my* friend. And yet, feeling this, seeing it in my mind as plainly as I see the sky above my head, there is a weakness in me that still

shrinks from the one imperative sacrifice of never seeing you again. I am fighting with it as a man fights with the strength of his despair. I have been near enough, not an hour since, to see the house where you live, and have forced myself away again out of sight of it. Can I force myself away farther still, now that my letter is written — now, when the useless confession escapes me, and I own to loving you with the first love I have ever known, with the last love I shall ever feel? Let the coming time answer the question; I dare not write of it or think of it more.'

"Those were the last words. In that strange way the letter ended.

"I felt a perfect fever of curiosity to know what he meant. His loving me, of course, was easy enough to understand. But what did he mean by saying he had been warned? Why was he never to live under the same roof, never to breathe the same air again with young Armadale? What sort of quarrel could it be which obliged one man to hide himself from another under an assumed name, and to put the mountains and the seas between them? Above all, if he came back, and let me fascinate him, why should it be fatal to the hateful lout who possesses the noble fortune, and lives in the great house?

"I never longed in my life as I longed to see him again, and put these questions to him. I got quite superstitious about it as the day drew on. They gave me a sweetbread and a cherry pudding for dinner. I actually tried if he would come back by the stones in the plate! He will, he won't, he will, he won't — and so on. It ended in 'he won't.' I rang the bell, and

had the things taken away. I contradicted Destiny quite fiercely. I said, 'He will!' and I waited at home for him.

"You don't know what a pleasure it is to me to give you all these little particulars. Count up — my bosom friend, my second mother — count up the money you have advanced on the chance of my becoming Mrs. Armadale, and then think of my feeling this breathless interest in another man. Oh, Mrs. Oldershaw, how intensely I enjoy the luxury of irritating you!

"The day got on towards evening. I rang again, and sent down to borrow a railway time-table. What trains were there to take him away on Sunday? The national respect for the Sabbath stood my friend. There was only one train, which had started hours before he wrote to me. I went and consulted my glass. It paid me the compliment of contradicting the divination by cherry-stones. My glass said, 'Get behind the window-curtain; he won't pass the long lonely evening without coming back again to look at the house.' I got behind the window-curtain, and waited with his letter in my hand.

"The dismal Sunday light faded, and the dismal Sunday quietness in the street grew quieter still. The dusk came, and I heard a step coming with it in the silence. My heart gave a little jump — only think of my having any heart left! I said to myself, 'Midwinter!' And Midwinter it was.

"When he came in sight he was walking slowly, stopping and hesitating at every two or three steps. My ugly little drawing-room window seemed to be beckoning him on in spite of himself. After waiting till I saw him come to a standstill, a little aside from

the house, but still within view of my irresistible window, I put on my things and slipped out by the back way into the garden. The landlord and his family were at supper, and nobody saw me. I opened the door in the wall, and got round by the lane into the street. At that awkward moment I suddenly remembered, what I had forgotten before, the spy set to watch me, who was, no doubt, waiting somewhere in sight of the house.

"It was necessary to get time to think, and it was (in my state of mind) impossible to let Midwinter go without speaking to him. In great difficulties you generally decide at once, if you decide at all. I decided to make an appointment with him for the next evening, and to consider in the interval how to manage the interview so that it might escape observation. This, as I felt at the time, was leaving my own curiosity free to torment me for four-and-twenty mortal hours — but what other choice had I? It was as good as giving up being mistress of Thorpe-Ambrose altogether, to come to a private understanding with Midwinter in the sight and possibly in the hearing of Armadale's spy.

"Finding an old letter of yours in my pocket, I drew back into the lane, and wrote on the blank leaf, with the little pencil that hangs at my watch-chain: — 'I must and will speak to you. It is impossible to-night, but be in the street to-morrow at this time, and leave me afterwards for ever, if you like. When you have read this, overtake me, and say as you pass, without stopping or looking round, 'Yes, I promise.'

"I folded up the paper, and came on him suddenly from behind. As he started and turned round, I put the note into his hand, pressed his hand, and passed

on. Before I had taken ten steps I heard him behind me. I can't say he didn't look round — I saw his big black eyes, bright and glittering in the dusk, devour me from head to foot in a moment; but otherwise he did what I told him. 'I can deny you nothing,' he whispered; 'I promise.' He went on and left me. I couldn't help thinking at the time how that brute and booby Armadale would have spoilt everything in the same situation.

"I tried hard all night to think of a way of making our interview of the next evening safe from discovery, and tried in vain. Even as early as this, I began to feel as if Midwinter's letter had, in some unaccountable manner, stupefied me.

"Monday morning made matters worse. News came from my faithful ally, Mr. Bashwood, that Miss Milroy and Armadale had met and become friends again. You may fancy the state I was in! An hour or two later there came more news from Mr. Bashwood — good news this time. The mischievous idiot at Thorpe-Ambrose had shown sense enough at last to be ashamed of himself. He had decided on withdrawing the spy that very day, and he and his lawyer had quarrelled in consequence.

"So here was the obstacle which I was too stupid to remove for myself, obligingly removed for me! No more need to fret about the coming interview with Midwinter — and plenty of time to consider my next proceedings, now that Miss Milroy and her precious swain had come together again. Would you believe it, the letter or the man himself (I don't know which), had taken such a hold on me that, though I tried and tried, I could think of nothing else — and this, when

I had every reason to fear that Miss Milroy was in a fair way of changing her name to Armadale, and when I knew that my heavy debt of obligation to her was not paid yet? Was there ever such perversity? I can't account for it — can you?

"The dusk of the evening came at last. I looked out of the window — and there he was!

"I joined him at once; the people of the house, as before, being too much absorbed in their eating and drinking to notice anything else. 'We mustn't be seen together here,' I whispered. 'I must go on first, and you must follow me.'

"He said nothing in the way of reply. What was going on in his mind I can't pretend to guess — but, after coming to his appointment, he actually hung back as if he was half inclined to go away again.

"'You look as if you were afraid of me,' I said.

"'I *am* afraid of you,' he answered — 'of you, and of myself.'

"It was not encouraging; it was not complimentary. But I was in such a frenzy of curiosity by this time, that if he had been ruder still, I should have taken no notice of it. I led the way a few steps towards the new buildings, and stopped and looked round after him.

"'Must I ask it of you as a favour, I said, 'after your giving me your promise, and after such a letter as you have written to me?'

"Something suddenly changed him; he was at my side in an instant. 'I beg your pardon, Miss Gwilt; lead the way where you please.' He dropped back a little after that answer, and I heard him say to himself,

'What *is* to be, *will* be. What have I to do with it, and what has she?'

"It could hardly have been the words, for I didn't understand them — it must have been the tone he spoke in, I suppose, that made me feel a momentary tremor. I was half-inclined, without the ghost of a reason for it, to wish him good-night, and go in again. Not much like *me*, you will say. Not much, indeed! It didn't last a moment. Your darling Lydia soon came to her senses again.

"I led the way towards the unfinished cottages, and the country beyond. It would have been much more to my taste to have had him into the house, and have talked to him in the light of the candles. But I had risked it once already; and in this scandal-mongering place, and in my critical position, I was afraid to risk it again. The garden was not to be thought of either — for the landlord smokes his pipe there after his supper. There was no alternative but to take him away from the town.

"From time to time, I looked back as I went on. There he was, always at the same distance, dim and ghostlike in the dusk, silently following me.

"I must leave off for a little while. The church bells have broken out, and the jangling of them drives me mad. In these days, when we have all got watches or clocks, why are bells wanted to remind us when the service begins? We don't require to be rung into the theatre. How excessively discreditable to the clergy to be obliged to ring us into the church!

"They have rung the congregation in at last — and I can take up my pen, and go on again.

"I was a little in doubt where to lead him to. The high road was on one side of me — but, empty as it looked, somebody might be passing when we least expected it. The other way was through the coppice. I led him through the coppice.

"At the outskirts of the trees, on the other side, there was a dip in the ground, with some felled timber lying in it, and a little pool beyond, still and white and shining in the twilight. The long grazing-grounds rose over its farther shore, with the mist thickening on them, and a dim black line far away of cattle in slow procession going home. There wasn't a living creature near; there wasn't a sound to be heard. I sat down on one of the felled trees, and looked back for him. 'Come,' I said softly, 'come and sit by me here.'

"Why am I so particular about all this? I hardly know. The place made an unaccountably vivid impression on me, and I can't help writing about it. If I end badly — suppose we say on the scaffold? — I believe the last thing I shall see, before the hangman pulls the drop, will be the little shining pool, and the long misty grazing-grounds, and the cattle winding dimly home in the thickening night. Don't be alarmed, you worthy creature! My fancy plays me strange tricks sometimes — and there is a little of last night's laudanum, I dare say, in this part of my letter.

"He came — in the strangest silent way, like a man walking in his sleep — he came and sat down by me. Either the night was very close, or I was by this time literally in a fever — I couldn't bear my bonnet on; I couldn't bear my gloves. The want to

look at him, and see what his singular silence meant, and the impossibility of doing it in the darkening light, irritated my nerves till I thought I should have screamed. I took his hand, to try if that would help me. It was burning hot; and it closed instantly on mine — you know how. Silence, after *that*, was not to be thought of. The one safe way was to begin talking to him at once.

"'Don't despise me,' I said. 'I am obliged to bring you to this lonely place; I should lose my character if we were seen together.'

"I waited a little. His hand warned me once more not to let the silence continue. I determined to *make* him speak to me this time.

"'You have interested me, and frightened me,' I went on. 'You have written me a very strange letter. I must know what it means.'

"'It is too late to ask. *You* have taken the way, and *I* have taken the way, from which there is no turning back.' He made that strange answer in a tone that was quite new to me — a tone that made me even more uneasy than his silence had made me the moment before. 'Too late,' he repeated, 'too late! There is only one question to ask me now.'

"'What is it?'

"As I said the words, a sudden trembling passed from his hand to mine, and told me instantly that I had better have held my tongue. Before I could move, before I could think, he had me in his arms. 'Ask me if I love you,' he whispered. At the same moment his head sank on my bosom; and some unutterable torture that was in him burst its way out, as it does with *us*, in a passion of sobs and tears.

"My first impulse was the impulse of a fool. I was on the point of making our usual protest and defending myself in our usual way. Luckily or unluckily, I don't know which, I have lost the fine edge of the sensitiveness of youth; and I checked the first movement of my hands, and the first word on my lips. Oh, dear, how old I felt, while he was sobbing his heart out on my breast! How I thought of the time when he might have possessed himself of my love! All he had possessed himself of now was — my waist.

"I wonder whether I pitied him? It doesn't matter if I did. At any rate, my hand lifted itself somehow, and my fingers twined themselves softly in his hair. Horrible recollections came back to me of other times, and made me shudder as I touched him. And yet I did it. What fools women are!

"'I won't reproach you,' I said gently; 'I won't say this is a cruel advantage to take of me, in such a position as mine. You are dreadfully agitated — I will let you wait a little, and compose yourself.'

"Having got as far as that, I stopped to consider how I should put the questions to him that I was burning to ask. But I was too confused, I suppose, or perhaps too impatient to consider. I let out what was uppermost in my mind, in the words that came first.

"'I don't believe you love me,' I said. 'You write strange things to me; you frighten me with mysteries. What did you mean by saying in your letter that it would be fatal to Mr. Armadale if you came back to me? What danger can there be to Mr. Armadale —?'

"Before I could finish the question, he suddenly lifted his head and unclasped his arms. I had apparently touched some painful subject which recalled him

to himself. Instead of my shrinking from *him*, it was he who shrank from *me*. I felt offended with him; why, I don't know — but offended I was; and I thanked him with my bitterest emphasis, for remembering what was due to me, *at last!*

"'Do you believe in Dreams?' he burst out in the most strangely abrupt manner, without taking the slightest notice of what I had said to him. 'Tell me,' he went on, without allowing me time to answer, 'were you, or was any relation of yours, ever connected with Allan Armadale's father or mother? Were you, or was anybody belonging to you, ever in the island of Madeira?'

"Conceive my astonishment, if you can. I turned cold. In an instant I turned cold all over. He was plainly in the secret of what had happened when I was in Mrs. Armadale's service in Madeira — in all probability before he was born! That was startling enough of itself. And he had evidently some reason of his own for trying to connect *me* with those events — which was more startling still.

"'No,' I said, as soon as I could trust myself to speak. 'I know nothing of his father or mother.'

"'And nothing of the island of Madeira?'

"'Nothing of the island of Madeira.'

"He turned his head away; and began talking to himself.

"'Strange!' he said. 'As certainly as I was in the Shadow's place at the window, *she* was in the Shadow's place at the pool!'

"Under other circumstances, his extraordinary behaviour might have alarmed me. But after his question about Madeira, there was some greater fear in me

which kept all common alarm at a distance. I don't think I ever determined on anything in my life as I determined on finding out how he had got his information, and who he really was. It was quite plain to me that I had roused some hidden feeling in him by my question about Armadale, which was as strong in its way as his feeling for *me*. What had become of my influence over him?

"I couldn't imagine what had become of it; but I could and did set to work to make him feel it again.

"'Don't treat me cruelly,' I said; 'I didn't treat *you* cruelly just now. Oh, Mr. Midwinter, it's so lonely, it's so dark — don't frighten me?'

"'Frighten you!' He was close to me again in a moment. 'Frighten you!' He repeated the word with as much astonishment as if I had woke him from a dream, and charged him with something that he had said in his sleep.

"It was on the tip of my tongue, finding how I had surprised him, to take him while he was off his guard, and to ask why my question about Armadale had produced such a change in his behaviour to me. But after what had happened already, I was afraid to risk returning to the subject too soon. Something or other — what they call an instinct, I daresay — warned me to let Armadale alone for the present, and to talk to him first about himself. As I told you in one of my early letters, I had noticed signs and tokens in his manner and appearance which convinced me, young as he was, that he had done something or suffered something out of the common in his past life. I had asked myself more and more suspiciously every time I saw him, whether he was what he appeared to be; and

first and foremost among my other doubts was a doubt whether he was passing among us by his real name. Having secrets to keep about my own past life, and having gone myself in other days by more than one assumed name, I suppose I am all the readier to suspect other people when I find something mysterious about them. Any way, having the suspicion in my mind, I determined to startle him, as he had startled me, by an unexpected question on my side — a question about his name.

"While I was thinking, he was thinking — and, as it soon appeared, of what I had just said to him. 'I am so grieved to have frightened you,' he whispered, with that gentleness and humility which we all so heartily despise in a man when he speaks to other women, and which we all so dearly like when he speaks to ourselves. 'I hardly know what I have been saying,' he went on; 'my mind is miserably disturbed. Pray forgive me, if you can — I am not myself to-night.'

"'I am not angry,' I said; 'I have nothing to forgive. We are both imprudent — we are both unhappy.' I laid my head on his shoulder. 'Do you really love me?' I asked him softly, in a whisper.

"His arm stole round me again; and I felt the quick beat of his heart get quicker and quicker. 'If you only knew!' he whispered back; 'if you only knew —" He could say no more. I felt his face bending towards mine, and dropped my head lower, and stopped him in the very act of kissing me. 'No,' I said; 'I am only a woman who has taken your fancy. You are treating me as if I was your promised wife.'

"'*Be* my promised wife!' he whispered eagerly,

and tried to raise my head. I kept it down. The horror of those old remembrances that you know of, came back, and made me tremble a little when he asked me to be his wife. I don't think I was actually faint; but something like faintness made me close my eyes. The moment I shut them, the darkness seemed to open as if lightning had split it: and the ghosts of *those other men* rose in the horrid gap, and looked at me.

"'Speak to me!' he whispered, tenderly. 'My darling, my angel, speak to me!'

"His voice helped me to recover myself. I had just sense enough left to remember that the time was passing, and that I had not put my question to him yet about his name.

"'Suppose I felt for you as you feel for me?' I said. 'Suppose I loved you dearly enough to trust you with the happiness of all my life to come?'

"I paused a moment to get my breath. It was unbearably still and close — the air seemed to have died when the night came.

"'Would you be marrying me honourably,' I went on, 'if you married me in your present name?'

"His arm dropped from my waist, and I felt him give one great start. After that he sat by me, still, and cold, and silent, as if my question had struck him dumb. I put my arm round his neck, and lifted my head again on his shoulder. Whatever the spell was I had laid on him, my coming closer in that way seemed to break it.

"'Who told you?' — he stopped. 'No,' he went on, 'nobody can have told you. What made you suspect ——?' He stopped again.

"'Nobody told me,' I said; 'and I don't know what made me suspect. Women have strange fancies sometimes. Is Midwinter really your name?'

"'I can't deceive you,' he answered, after another interval of silence, 'Midwinter is *not* really my name.'

"I nestled a little closer to him.

"'What *is* your name?' I asked.

"He hesitated.

"I lifted my face till my cheek just touched his. I persisted, with my lips close at his ear, —

"'What, no confidence in me even yet! No confidence in the woman who has almost confessed she loves you — who has almost consented to be your wife!'

"He turned his face to mine. For the second time he tried to kiss me, and for the second time I stopped him.

"'If I tell you my name,' he said, 'I must tell you more.'

"I let my cheek touch his cheek again.

"'Why not?' I said. 'How can I love a man — much less marry him — if he keeps himself a stranger to me?'

"There was no answering that, as I thought. But he did answer it.

"'It is a dreadful story,' he said. 'It may darken all your life, if you know it, as it has darkened mine.'

"I put my other arm round him, and persisted. 'Tell it me; I'm not afraid; tell it me.'

"He began to yield to my other arm.

"'Will you keep it a sacred secret?' he said 'Never to be breathed — never to be known but to you and me?'

"I promised him it should be a secret. I waited in a perfect frenzy of expectation. Twice he tried to begin, and twice his courage failed him.

"'I can't!' he broke out in a wild helpless way. I can't tell it!'

"My curiosity, or more likely my temper, got beyond all control. He had irritated me till I was reckless what I said or what I did. I suddenly clasped him close, and pressed my lips to his. 'I love you!' I whispered in a kiss. '*Now* will you tell me?'

"For the moment he was speechless. I don't know whether I did it purposely to drive him wild. I don't know whether I did it involuntarily in a burst of rage. Nothing is certain but that I interpreted his silence the wrong way. I pushed him back from me in a fury the instant after I had kissed him. 'I hate you!' I said. 'You have maddened me into forgetting myself. Leave me! I don't care for the darkness. Leave me instantly, and never see me again!"

"He caught me by the hand and stopped me. He spoke in a new voice — he suddenly *commanded*, as only men can.

" Sit down,' he said. 'You have given me back my courage — you shall know who I am.'

"In the silence and the darkness all round us, I obeyed him, and sat down.

"In the silence and the darkness all round us, he took me in his arms again, and told me who he was.

"Shall I trust you with his story? Shall I tell you his real name? Shall I show you, as I threatened,

the thoughts that have grown out of my interview with him, and out of all that has happened to me since that time?

"Or shall I keep his secret as I promised? and keep my own secret too, by bringing this weary long letter to an end at the very moment when you are burning to hear more!

"Those are serious questions, Mrs. Oldershaw — more serious than you suppose. I have had time to calm down, and I begin to see what I failed to see when I first took up my pen to write to you — the wisdom of looking at consequences. Have I frightened myself in trying to frighten *you?* It is possible — strange as it may seem, it is really possible.

"I have been at the window for the last minute or two, thinking. There is plenty of time for thinking before the post leaves. The people are only now coming out of church.

"I have settled to put my letter on one side, and to take a look at my diary. In plainer words I must see what I risk if I decide on trusting you; and my diary will show me what my head is too weary to calculate without help. I have written the story of my days (and sometimes the story of my nights) much more regularly than usual for the last week, having reasons of my own for being particularly careful in this respect under present circumstances. If I end in doing what it is now in my mind to do, it would be madness to trust to my memory. The smallest forgetfulness of the slightest event that has happened from the night of my interview with Midwinter to the present time, might be utter ruin to me.

"'Utter ruin to her!' you will say. 'What kind of ruin does she mean?'

"Wait a little, till I have asked my diary whether I can safely tell you?"

CHAPTER X.

Miss Gwilt's Diary.

"*July 21st, Monday night, eleven o'clock.* — Midwinter has just left me. We parted by my desire at the path out of the coppice; he going his way to the hotel, and I going mine to my lodgings.

"I have managed to avoid making another appointment with him, by arranging to write to him to-morrow morning. This gives me the night's interval to compose myself, and to coax my mind back (if I can) to my own affairs. Will the night pass, and the morning find me still thinking of the Letter that came to him from his father's deathbed? of the night he watched through, on the Wrecked Ship; and, more than all, of the first breathless moment when he told me his real Name?

"Would it help me to shake off these impressions, I wonder, if I made the effort of writing them down? There would be no danger, in that case, of my forgetting anything important. And perhaps, after all, it may be the fear of forgetting something which I ought to remember that keeps this story of Midwinter's weighing as it does on my mind. At any rate, the experiment is worth trying. In my present situation I *must* be free to think of other things, or I shall never find my

way through all the difficulties at Thorpe-Ambrose that are still to come.

"Let me think. What *haunts* me, to begin with?

"The Names haunt me. I keep saying and saying to myself: Both alike! — Christian name and surname, both alike! A light-haired Allan Armadale, whom I have long since known of, and who is the son of my old mistress. A dark-haired Allan Armadale, whom I only know of now, and who is only known to others under the name of Ozias Midwinter. Stranger still; it is not relationship, it is not chance, that has made them namesakes. The father of the light Armadale was the man who was *born* to the family name, and who lost the family inheritance. The father of the dark Armadale was the man who *took* the name, on condition of getting the inheritance — and who got it.

"So there are two of them — I can't help thinking of it — both unmarried. The light-haired Armadale, who offers to the woman who can secure him, eight thousand a year while he lives; who leaves her twelve hundred a year when he dies; who must and shall marry me for those two golden reasons; and whom I hate and loathe as I never hated and loathed a man yet. And the dark-haired Armadale, who has a poor little income which might perhaps pay his wife's milliner, if his wife was careful; who has just left me, persuaded that I mean to marry him; and whom — well, whom I *might* have loved once, before I was the woman I am now.

"And Allan the Fair doesn't know he has a namesake. And Allan the Dark has kept the secret from everybody but the Somersetshire clergyman (whose discretion he can depend on), and myself.

"And there are two Allan Armadales — two Allan Armadales — two Allan Armadales. There! three is a lucky number. Haunt me again, after that, if you can!

"What next? The murder in the timber-ship? No; the murder is a good reason why the dark Armadale, whose father committed it, should keep his secret from the fair Armadale, whose father was killed; but it doesn't concern *me*. I remember there was a suspicion in Madeira at the time of something wrong. *Was* it wrong? Was the man who had been tricked out of his wife, to blame for shutting the cabin-door, and leaving the man who had tricked him, to drown in the wreck? Yes, — the woman wasn't worth it.

"What am I sure of that really concerns myself?

"I am sure of one very important thing. I am sure that Midwinter — I must call him by his ugly false name, or I may confuse the two Armadales before I have done — I am sure that Midwinter is perfectly ignorant that I and the little imp of twelve years old who waited on Mrs. Armadale in Madeira, and copied the letters that were supposed to arrive from the West Indies, are one and the same. There are not many girls of twelve who could have imitated a man's handwriting, and held their tongues about it afterwards, as I did — but that doesn't matter now. What does matter is, that Midwinter's belief in the Dream is Midwinter's only reason for trying to connect me with Allan Armadale, by associating me with Allan Armadale's father and mother. I asked him if he actually thought me old enough to have known either of them. And he said No, poor fellow, in the most innocent bewildered way. Would he say No, if he

saw me now? Shall I turn to the glass and see if I look my five-and-thirty years? or shall I go on writing? I will go on writing.

"There is one thing more that haunts me almost as obstinately as the Names.

"I wonder whether I am right in relying on Midwinter's superstition (as I do) to help me in keeping him at arm's length. After having let the excitement of the moment hurry me into saying more than I need have said, he is certain to press me; he is certain to come back, with a man's hateful selfishness and impatience in such things, to the question of marrying me. Will the Dream help me to check him? After alternately believing and disbelieving in it, he has got, by his own confession, to believing in it again. Can I say I believe in it, too? I have better reasons for doing so than he knows of. I am not only the person who helped Mrs. Armadale's marriage by helping her to impose on her own father, — I am the woman who tried to drown herself; the woman who started the series of accidents which put young Armadale in possession of his fortune; the woman who has come to Thorpe-Ambrose to marry him for his fortune now he has got it; and more extraordinary still, the woman who stood in the Shadow's place at the pool! These may be coincidences, but they are strange coincidences. I declare I begin to fancy that *I* believe in the Dream too!

"Suppose I say to him, 'I think as you think. I say, what you said in your letter to me, Let us part before the harm is done. Leave me before the third Vision of the Dream comes true. Leave me; and put

the mountains and the seas between you and the man who bears your name!'

"Suppose, on the other side, that his love for me makes him reckless of everything else? Suppose he says those desperate words again, which I understand now: — 'What *is* to be, *will* be. What have I to do with it, and what has she?' Suppose — suppose —

"I won't write any more. I hate writing. It doesn't relieve me — it makes me worse. I'm farther from being able to think of all that I *must* think of, than I was when I sat down. It is past midnight. To-morrow has come already — and here I am as helpless as the stupidest woman living! Bed is the only fit place for me.

"Bed? If it was ten years since, instead of to-day; and if I had married Midwinter for love, I might be going to bed now with nothing heavier on my mind than a visit on tiptoe to the nursery, and a last look at night to see if my children were sleeping quietly in their cribs. I wonder whether I should have loved my children if I had ever had any? Perhaps, yes — perhaps, no. It doesn't matter.

"*Tuesday morning, ten o'clock.* — Who was the man who invented laudanum? I thank him from the bottom of my heart, whoever he was. If all the miserable wretches in pain of body and mind, whose comforter he has been, could meet together to sing his praises, what a chorus it would be! I have had six delicious hours of oblivion; I have woke up with my mind composed; I have written a perfect little letter to Midwinter; I have drunk my nice cup of tea, with a real relish of it; I have dawdled over my morning toilet with an exquisite sense of relief — and all through the

modest little bottle of Drops, which I see on my bedroom chimney-piece at this moment. 'Drops,' you are a darling! If I love nothing else, I love *you*.

"My letter to Midwinter has been sent through the post; and I have told him to reply to me in the same manner.

"I feel no anxiety about his answer — he can only answer in one way. I have asked for a little time to consider, because my family circumstances require some consideration, in his interests as well as in mine. I have engaged to tell him what those circumstances are (what shall I say, I wonder?) when we next meet; and I have requested him in the meantime to keep all that has passed between us a secret for the present. As to what he is to do himself in the interval while I am supposed to be considering, I have left it to his own discretion — merely reminding him that his attempting to see me again (while our positions towards each other cannot be openly avowed) might injure my reputation. I have offered to write to him if he wishes it; and I have ended by promising to make the interval of our necessary separation as short as I can.

"This sort of plain unaffected letter — which I might have written to him last night, if his story had not been running in my head as it did — has one defect, I know. It certainly keeps him out of the way, while I am casting my net, and catching my gold fish at the great house for the second time — but it also leaves an awkward day of reckoning to come with Midwinter if I succeed. How am I to manage him? What am I to do? I ought to face those two questions as boldly as usual — but somehow my courage seems to fail me; and I don't quite fancy meeting *that*

difficulty, till the time comes when it *must* be met. Shall I confess to my diary that I am sorry for Midwinter, and that I shrink a little from thinking of the day when he hears that I am going to be mistress at the great house?

"But I am not mistress yet — and I can't take a step in the direction of the great house till I have got the answer to my letter, and till I know that Midwinter is out of the way. Patience! patience! I must go and forget myself at my piano. There is the 'Moonlight Sonata' open, and tempting me, on the music-stand. Have I nerve enough to play it, I wonder? Or will it set me shuddering with the mystery and terror of it, as it did the other day?

"*Five o'clock.* — I have got his answer. The slightest request I can make is a command to him. He has gone — and he sends me his address in London. 'There are two considerations' (he says,) 'which help to reconcile me to leaving you. The first is, that *you* wish it, and that it is only to be for a little while. The second is, that I think I can make some arrangements in London for adding to my income by my own labour. I have never cared for money for myself — but you don't know how I am beginning already to prize the luxuries and refinements that money can provide, for my wife's sake.' Poor fellow! I almost wish I had not written to him as I did; I almost wish I had not sent him away from me.

"Fancy, if Mother Oldershaw saw this page in my diary! I have had a letter from her this morning — a letter to remind me of my obligations, and to tell me she suspects things are all going wrong. Let her

suspect! I shan't trouble myself to answer — I can't be worried with that old wretch in the state I am in now.

"It is a lovely afternoon — I want a walk — I mustn't think of Midwinter. Suppose I put on my bonnet, and try my experiment at once at the great house? Everything is in my favour. There is no spy to follow me, and no lawyer to keep me out, this time. Am I handsome enough, to-day? Well, yes — handsome enough to be a match for a little dowdy, awkward, freckled creature, who ought to be perched on a form at school, and strapped to a back-board to straighten her crooked shoulders.

"'The nursery lisps out in all they utter;
Besides, they always smell of bread and butter.'

"How admirably Byron has described girls in their teens!

"*Eight o'clock.* — I have just got back from Armadale's house. I have seen him, and spoken to him; and the end of it may be set down in three plain words. I have failed. There is no more chance of my being Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose than there is of my being Queen of England.

"Shall I write and tell Oldershaw? Shall I go back to London? Not till I have had time to think a little. Not just yet.

"Let me think; I have failed completely failed, with all the circumstances in favour of success. I caught him alone on the drive in front of the house. He was excessively disconcerted, but at the same time quite willing to hear me. I tried him, first quietly — then with tears, and the rest of it. I introduced my-

self in the character of the poor innocent woman whom he had been the means of injuring. I confused, I convinced him. I went on to the purely Christian part of my errand, and spoke with such feeling of his separation from his friend, for which I was innocently responsible, that I turned his odious rosy face quite pale, and made him beg me at last not to distress him. But, whatever other feelings I roused in him, I never once roused his old feeling for *me*. I saw it in his eyes when he looked at me; I felt it in his fingers when we shook hands. We parted friends and nothing more.

"It is for this, is it, Miss Milroy, that I resisted temptation, morning after morning, when I knew you were out alone in the park? I have just left you time to slip in, and take my place in Armadale's good graces, have I? I never resisted temptation yet without suffering for it in some such way as this! If I had only followed my first thoughts, on the day when I took leave of you, my young lady — well, well, never mind that now. I have got the future before me; you are not Mrs. Armadale yet! And I can tell you one other thing — whoever else he marries, he will never marry *you*. If I am even with you in no other way, trust me, whatever comes of it, to be even with you there!

"I am not, to my own surprise, in one of my furious passions. The last time I was in this perfectly cool state, under serious provocation, something came of it, which I daren't write down, even in my own private diary. I shouldn't be surprised if something comes of it now.

"On my way back, I called at Mr. Bashwood's

lodgings in the town. He was not at home, and I left a message telling him to come here to-night and speak to me. I mean to relieve him at once of the duty of looking after Armadale and Miss Milroy. I may not see my way yet to ruining her prospects at Thorpe-Ambrose as completely as she has ruined mine. But when the time comes, and I do see it, I don't know to what lengths my sense of injury may take me; and there may be inconvenience, and possibly danger, in having such a chicken-hearted creature as Mr. Bashwood in my confidence.

"I suspect I am more upset by all this than I supposed. Midwinter's story is beginning to haunt me again, without rhyme or reason.

"A soft, quick, trembling knock at the street door! I know who it is. No hand but old Bashwood's could knock in that way.

"*Nine o'clock.* — I have just got rid of him. He has surprised me by coming out in a new character.

"It seems (though I didn't detect him) that he was at the great house while I was in company with Armadale. He saw us talking on the drive, and he afterwards heard what the servants said, who saw us too. The wise opinion below stairs is that we have 'made it up,' and that the master is likely to marry me after all. 'He's sweet on her red hair,' was the elegant expression they used in the kitchen. 'Little Missie can't match her there — and little Missie will get the worst of it.' How I hate the coarse ways of the lower orders!

"While old Bashwood was telling me this, I thought he looked even more confused and nervous than usual. But I failed to see what was really the matter until

after I had told him that he was to leave all further observation of Mr. Armadale and Miss Milroy to me. Every drop of the little blood there is in the feeble old creature's body seemed to fly up into his face. He made quite an overpowering effort; he really looked as if he would drop down dead of fright at his own boldness; but he forced out the question, for all that, stammering, and stuttering, and kneading desperately with both hands at the brim of his hideous great hat. 'I beg your pardon, Miss Gwi-Gwi-Gwilt! You are not really go-go-going to marry Mr. Armadale, are you?' Jealous — if ever I saw it in a man's face yet, I saw it in his — actually jealous of Armadale at his age! If I had been in the humour for it, I should have burst out laughing in his face. As it was, I was angry, and lost all patience with him. I told him he was an old fool, and ordered him to go on quietly with his usual business until I sent him word that he was wanted again. He submitted as usual; but there was an indescribable something in his watery old eyes, when he took leave of me, which I have never noticed in them before. Love has the credit of working all sorts of strange transformations. Can it be really possible that Love has made Mr. Bashwood man enough to be angry with me.

"*Wednesday.* — My experience of Miss Milroy's habits suggested a suspicion to me last night, which I thought it desirable to clear up this morning.

"It was always her way, when I was at the cottage, to take a walk early in the morning before breakfast. Considering that I used often to choose that very time for *my* private meetings with Armadale, it struck me

as likely that my former pupil might be taking a leaf out of my book, and that I might make some desirable discoveries if I turned my steps in the direction of the major's garden at the right hour. I deprived myself of my Drops, to make sure of waking; passed a miserable night in consequence; and was ready enough to get up at six o'clock, and walk the distance from my lodgings to the cottage in the fresh morning air.

"I had not been five minutes on the park-side of the garden enclosure before I saw her come out.

"*She* seemed to have had a bad night too; her eyes were heavy and red, and her lips and cheeks looked swollen as if she had been crying. There was something on her mind, evidently; something, as it soon appeared, to take her out of the garden into the park. She walked (if one can call it walking, with such legs as hers!) straight to the summer-house, and opened the door, and crossed the bridge, and went on quicker and quicker towards the low ground in the park, where the trees are thickest. I followed her over the open space with perfect impunity, in the preoccupied state she was in; and when she began to slacken her pace among the trees, I was among the trees too, and was not afraid of her seeing me.

"Before long, there was a crackling and trampling of heavy feet coming up towards us through the underwood in a deep dip of the ground. I knew that step as well as she knew it. 'Here I am,' she said, in a faint little voice. I kept behind the trees a few yards off, in some doubt on which side Armadale would come out of the underwood to join her. He came out, up the side of the dell opposite to the tree behind which I was standing. They sat down together on the bank.

I sat down behind the tree, and looked at them through the underwood, and heard without the slightest difficulty every word that they said.

"The talk began by his noticing that she looked out of spirits, and asking if anything had gone wrong at the cottage. The artful little minx lost no time in making the necessary impression on him; she began to cry. He took her hand, of course, and tried, in his brutishly straightforward way, to comfort her. No: she was not to be comforted. A miserable prospect was before her; she had not slept the whole night for thinking of it. Her father had called her into his room the previous evening, had spoken about the state of her education, and had told her, in so many words, that she was to go to school. The place had been found, and the terms had been settled; and as soon as her clothes could be got ready, Miss was to go.

"'While that hateful Miss Gwilt was in the house,' says this model young person, 'I would have gone to school willingly — I wanted to go. But it's all different now; I don't think of it in the same way; I feel too old for school. I'm quite heart-broken, Mr. Armadale.' There she stopped as if she had meant to say more, and gave him a look which finished the sentence plainly — 'I'm quite heart-broken, Mr. Armadale, now we are friendly again, at going away from *you!*' For downright brazen impudence, which a grown woman would be ashamed of, give me the young girls whose 'modesty' is so pertinaciously insisted on by the nauseous domestic sentimentalists of the present day!

"Even Armadale, booby as he is, understood her. After bewildering himself in a labyrinth of words that led nowhere, he took her — one can hardly say round

the waist, for she hasn't got one — he took her round the last hook-and-eye of her dress, and, by way of offering her a refuge from the indignity of being sent to school at her age, made her a proposal of marriage in so many words.

"If I could have killed them both at that moment by lifting up my little finger, I have not the least doubt I should have lifted it. As things were, I only waited to see what Miss Milroy would do.

"She appeared to think it necessary — feeling, I suppose, that she had met him without her father's knowledge, and not forgetting that I had had the start of her as the favoured object of Mr. Armadale's good opinion — to assert herself by an explosion of virtuous indignation. She wondered how he could think of such a thing after his conduct with Miss Gwilt, and after her father had forbidden him the house! Did he want to make her feel how inexcusably she had forgotten what was due to herself? Was it worthy of a gentleman to propose what he knew as well as she did, was impossible? and so on, and so on. Any man with brains in his head would have known what all this rodomontade really meant. Armadale took it so seriously that he actually attempted to justify himself.

"He declared, in his headlong blundering way, that he was quite in earnest; he and her father might make it up, and be friends again: and if the major persisted in treating him as a stranger, young ladies and gentlemen in their situation had made runaway marriages before now, and fathers and mothers who wouldn't forgive them before, had forgiven them afterwards. Such outrageously straightforward love-making as this, left Miss Milroy, of course, but two alternatives

— to confess that she had been saying No, when she meant Yes, or to take refuge in another explosion. She was hypocrite enough to prefer another explosion. 'How dare you, Mr. Armadale? Go away directly! It's inconsiderate, it's heartless, it's perfectly disgraceful to say such things to me!' and so on, and so on. It seems incredible, but it is not the less true, that he was positively fool enough to take her at her word. He begged her pardon, and went away like a child that is put in the corner — the most contemptible object in the form of man that eyes ever looked on!

"She waited, after he had gone, to compose herself, and I waited behind the trees to see how she would succeed. Her eyes wandered round slily to the path by which he had left her. She smiled (grinned would be the truer way of putting it, with such a mouth as hers); took a few steps on tiptoe to look after him; turned back again, and suddenly burst into a violent fit of crying. I am not quite so easily taken in as Armadale, and I saw what it all meant plainly enough.

"'To-morrow,' I thought to myself, 'you will be in the park again, miss, by pure accident. The next day, you will lead him on into proposing to you for the second time. The day after, he will venture back to the subject of runaway marriages, and you will only be becomingly confused. And the day after that, if he has got a plan to propose, and if your clothes are ready to be packed for school, you will listen to him.' Yes, yes; Time is always on the man's side, where a woman is concerned, if the man is only patient enough to let Time help him.

"I let her leave the place and go back to the

cottage, quite unconscious that I had been looking at her. I waited among the trees, thinking. The truth is, I was impressed by what I had heard and seen, in a manner that it is not very easy to describe. It put the whole thing before me in a new light. It showed me — what I had never even suspected till this morning — that she is really fond of him.

"Heavy as my debt of obligation is to her, there is no fear *now*, of my failing to pay it to the last farthing. It would have been no small triumph for me to stand between Miss Milroy and her ambition to be one of the leading ladies of the county. But it is infinitely more, where her first love is concerned, to stand between Miss Milroy and her heart's desire. Shall I remember my own youth and spare her? No! She has deprived me of the one chance I had of breaking the chain that binds me to a past life too horrible to be thought of. I am thrown back into a position, compared to which the position of an outcast who walks the streets is endurable and enviable. No, Miss Milroy — no, Mr. Armadale; I will spare neither of you.

"I have been back some hours. I have been thinking, and nothing has come of it. Ever since I got that strange letter of Midwinter's last Sunday, my usual readiness in emergencies has deserted me. When I am not thinking of him or of his story, my mind feels quite stupefied. I who have always known what to do on other occasions, don't know what to do now. It would be easy enough, of course, to warn Major Milroy of his daughter's proceedings. But the major is fond of his daughter; Armadale is anxious to be reconciled with him; Armadale is rich and prosperous, and ready

to submit to the elder man — and sooner or later they will be friends again, and the marriage will follow. Warning Major Milroy is only the way to embarrass them for the present; it is not the way to part them for good and all.

"What *is* the way? I can't see it. I could tear my own hair off my head! I could burn the house down! If there was a train of gunpowder under the whole world, I could light it, and blow the whole world to destruction — I am in such a rage, such a frenzy with myself for not seeing it!

"Poor dear Midwinter! Yes, '*dear*.' I don't care. I'm lonely and helpless. I want somebody who is gentle and loving, to make much of me; I wish I had his head on my bosom again; I have a good mind to go to London, and marry him. Am I mad? Yes; all people who are as miserable as I am, are mad. I must go to the window and get some air. Shall I jump out? No; it disfigures one so, and the coroner's inquest lets so many people see it.

"The air has revived me. I begin to remember that I have Time on my side, at any rate. Nobody knows but me, of their secret meetings in the park the first thing in the morning. If jealous old Bashwood, who is slinking and sly enough for anything, tries to look privately after Armadale, in his own interests, he will try at the usual time when he goes to the steward's office. He knows nothing of Miss Milroy's early habits; and he won't be on the spot till Armadale has got back to the house. For another week to come, I may wait and watch them, and choose my own time and way of interfering the moment I see a chance of his getting the better of her hesitation, and making her say Yes.

"So here I wait, without knowing how things will end with Midwinter in London; with my purse getting emptier and emptier, and no appearance so far of any new pupils to fill it; with Mother Oldershaw certain to insist on having her money back the moment she knows I have failed; without prospects, friends, or hopes of any kind — a lost woman, if ever there was a lost woman yet. Well! I say it again and again — I don't care! Here I stop, if I sell the clothes off my back, if I hire myself at the public-house to play to the brutes in the tap-room; here I stop till the time comes, and I see the way to parting Armadale and Miss Milroy for ever!

"*Seven o'clock.* — Any signs that the time is coming yet? I hardly know — there are signs of a change, at any rate, in my position in the neighbourhood.

"Two of the oldest and ugliest of the many old and ugly ladies who took up my case when I left Major Milroy's service, have just called, announcing themselves with the insufferable impudence of charitable Englishwomen, as a deputation from my patronesses. It seems, that the news of my reconciliation with Armadale has spread from the servants' offices at the great house, and has reached the town, with this result.

"It is the unanimous opinion of my 'patronesses' (and the opinion of Major Milroy also, who has been consulted,) that I have acted with the most inexcusable imprudence in going to Armadale's house, and in there speaking on friendly terms with a man whose conduct towards myself has made his name a by-word in the neighbourhood. My total want of self-respect in this

matter has given rise to a report that I am trading as cleverly as ever on my good looks, and that I am as likely as not to end in making Armadale marry me after all. My 'patronesses' are of course too charitable to believe this. They merely feel it necessary to remonstrate with me in a Christian spirit, and to warn me that any second and similar imprudence on my part would force all my best friends in the place to withdraw the countenance and protection which I now enjoy.

"Having addressed me, turn and turn about, in these terms (evidently all rehearsed beforehand), my two Gorgon-visitors straightened themselves in their chairs, and looked at me as much as to say, 'You may often have heard of Virtue, Miss Gwilt, but we don't believe you ever really saw it in full bloom till we came and called on you.'

"Seeing they were bent on provoking me, I kept my temper, and answered them in my smoothest, sweetest, and most ladylike manner. I have noticed that the Christianity of a certain class of respectable people begins when they open their prayer-books at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, and ends when they shut them up again at one o'clock on Sunday afternoon. Nothing so astonishes and insults Christians of this sort as reminding them of their Christianity on a week-day. On this hint, as the man says in the play, I spoke.

"'What have I done that is wrong?' I asked, innocently. 'Mr. Armadale has injured me; and I have been to his house and forgiven him the injury. Surely there must be some mistake, ladies? You can't have really come here to remonstrate with me in a Christian spirit for performing an act of Christianity?'

"The two Gorgons got up. I firmly believe some women have cats' tails as well as cats' faces. I firmly believe the tails of those two particular cats wagged slowly under their petticoats, and swelled to four times their proper size.

"'Temper we were prepared for, Miss Gwilt,' they said, 'but not Profanity. We wish you good evening.'

"So they left me, and so 'Miss Gwilt' sinks out of the patronizing notice of the neighbourhood.

"I wonder what will come of this trumpery little quarrel? One thing will come of it which I can see already. The report will reach Miss Milroy's ears. She will insist on Armadale's justifying himself — and Armadale will end in satisfying her of his innocence by making another proposal. This will be quite likely to hasten matters between them — at least it would with me. If I was in her place, I should say to myself, 'I will make sure of him while I can.' Supposing it doesn't rain to-morrow morning, I think I will take another early walk in the direction of the park.

"*Midnight.* — As I can't take my drops, with a morning walk before me, I may as well give up all hope of sleeping, and go on with my diary. Even *with* my drops, I doubt if my head would be very quiet on my pillow to-night. Since the little excitement of the scene with my 'lady-patronesses' has worn off, I have been troubled with misgivings which would leave me but a poor chance, under any circumstances, of getting much rest.

"I can't imagine why, but the parting words spoken to Armadale by that old brute of a lawyer, have come back to my mind! Here they are, as reported in Mr.

Bashwood's letter: — 'Some other person's curiosity may go on from the point where you (and I) have stopped, and some other person's hand may let the broad daylight in yet on Miss Gwilt.'

"What does he mean by that? And what did he mean afterwards when he overtook old Bashwood in the drive, by telling him to gratify his curiosity? Does this hateful Pedgift actually suppose there is any chance —? Ridiculous! Why, I have only to *look* at the feeble old creature, and he daren't lift his little finger unless I tell him. *He* try to pry into my past life indeed! Why, people with ten times his brains, and a hundred times his courage, had tried — and have left off as wise as they began.

"I don't know though — it might have been better if I had kept my temper when Bashwood was here the other night. And it might be better still if I saw him to-morrow; and took him back into my good graces by giving him something to do for me. Suppose I tell him to look after the two Pedgifts, and to discover whether there is any chance of their attempting to renew their connection with Armadale? No such thing is at all likely — but if I gave old Bashwood this commission, it would flatter his sense of his own importance to me, and would at the same time serve the excellent purpose of keeping him out of my way.

"*Thursday morning, nine o'clock.* — I have just got back from the park.

"For once, I have proved a true prophet. There they were together, at the same early hour, in the same secluded situation among the trees; and there was Miss

in full possession of the report of my visit to the great house, and taking her tone accordingly.

"After saying one or two things about me, which I promise him not to forget, Armadale took the way to convince her of his constancy which I felt beforehand he would be driven to take. He repeated his proposal of marriage, with excellent effect this time. Tears and kisses and protestations followed; and my late pupil opened her heart at last, in the most innocent manner. Home, she confessed, was getting so miserable to her now, that it was only less miserable than going to school. Her mother's temper was becoming more violent and unmanageable every day. The nurse, who was the only person with any influence over her, had gone away in disgust. Her father was becoming more and more immersed in his clock, and was made more and more resolute to send her away from home, by the distressing scenes which now took place with her mother, almost day by day. I waited through these domestic disclosures on the chance of hearing any plans they might have for the future discussed between them; and my patience, after no small exercise of it, was rewarded at last.

"The first suggestion (as was only natural where such a fool as Armadale was concerned) came from the girl.

"She started an idea, which I own I had not anticipated. She proposed that Armadale should write to her father; and, cleverer still, she prevented all fear of his blundering by telling him what he was to say. He was to express himself as deeply distressed at his estrangement from the major, and to request permission to call at the cottage, and say a few words in his own

justification. That was all. The letter was not to be sent that day, for the applicants for the vacant place of Mrs. Milroy's nurse were coming, and seeing them and questioning them would put her father, with his dislike of such things, in no humour to receive Armadale's application indulgently. The Friday would be the day to send the letter, and on the Saturday morning, if the answer was unfortunately not favourable, they might meet again. 'I don't like deceiving my father; he has always been so kind to me. And there will be no need to deceive him, Allan, if we can only make you friends again.' Those were the last words the little hypocrite said, when I left them.

"What will the major do? Saturday morning will show. I won't think of it till Saturday morning has come and gone. They are not man and wife yet; and again and again I say it, though my brains are as helpless as ever, man and wife they shall never be.

"On my way home again, I caught Bashwood at his breakfast, with his poor old black teapot, and his little penny loaf, and his one cheap morsel of oily butter, and his darned dirty table-cloth. It sickens me to think of it.

"I coaxed and comforted the miserable old creature till the tears stood in his eyes, and he quite blushed with pleasure. He undertakes to look after the Pedgifts with the utmost alacrity. Pedgift the elder, he describes when once roused, as the most obstinate man living; nothing will induce him to give way, unless Armadale gives way also on his side. Pedgift the younger is much the more likely of the two to make attempts at a reconciliation. Such at least is Bashwood's opinion. It is of very little con-

sequence now what happens either way. The only important thing is to tie my elderly admirer safely again to my apron-string. And this is done.

"The post is late this morning. It has only just come in, and has brought me a letter from Midwinter.

"It is a charming letter; it flatters me and flutters me as if I was a young girl again. No reproaches for my never having written to him; no hateful hurrying of me, in plain words, to marry him. He only writes to tell me a piece of news. He has obtained, through his lawyers, a prospect of being employed as occasional correspondent to a newspaper which is about to be started in London. The employment will require him to leave England for the Continent, which would exactly meet his own wishes for the future, but he cannot consider the proposal seriously until he has first ascertained whether it would meet my wishes too. He knows no will but mine, and he leaves me to decide, after first mentioning the time allowed him before his answer must be sent in. It is the time of course (if I agree to his going abroad) in which I must marry him. But there is not a word about this in his letter. He asks for nothing but a sight of my handwriting to help him through the interval, while we are separated from each other.

"That is the letter; not very long, but so prettily expressed.

"I think I can penetrate the secret of his fancy for going abroad. That wild idea of putting the mountains and the seas between Armadale and himself is still in his mind. As if either he or I could escape doing what we are fated to do — supposing we really

are fated — by putting a few hundred, or a few thousand miles, between Armadale and ourselves! What strange absurdity and inconsistency! And yet how I like him for being absurd and inconsistent; for don't I see plainly that I am at the bottom of it all? Who leads this clever man astray in spite of himself? Who makes him too blind to see the contradiction in his own conduct, which he would see plainly in the conduct of another person? How interested I do feel in him? How dangerously near I am to shutting my eyes on the past, and letting myself love him! Was Eve fonder of Adam than ever, I wonder, after she had coaxed him into eating the apple? I should have quite doted on him if I had been in her place. (Memorandum: — To write Midwinter a charming little letter on my side, with a kiss in it; and as time is allowed him before he sends in his answer, to ask for time too, before I tell him whether I will or will not go abroad.)

"*Five o'clock.* — A tiresome visit from my landlady; eager for a little gossip, and full of news which she thinks will interest me.

"She is acquainted, I find, with Mrs. Milroy's late nurse; and she has been seeing her friend off at the station, this afternoon. They talked of course of affairs at the cottage, and my name found its way into the conversation. I am quite wrong, it seems, if the nurse's authority is to be trusted, in believing Miss Milroy to be responsible for sending Mr. Armadale to my reference in London. Miss Milroy really knew nothing about it, and it all originated in her mother's mad jealousy of me. The present wretched state of

things at the cottage is due entirely to the same cause. Mrs. Milroy is firmly persuaded that my remaining at Thorpe-Ambrose is referable to my having some private means of communicating with the major which it is impossible for her to discover. With this conviction in her mind, she has become so unmanageable that no person, with any chance of bettering herself, could possibly remain in attendance on her; and sooner or later, the major, object to it as he may, will be obliged to place her under proper medical care.

"That is the sum and substance of what the wearisome landlady had to tell me. Unnecessary to say that I was not in the least interested by it. Even if the nurse's assertion is to be depended on — which I persist in doubting — it is of no importance now. I know that Miss Milroy, and nobody *but* Miss Milroy, has utterly ruined my prospect of becoming Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose — and I care to know nothing more. If her mother was really alone in the attempt to expose my false reference, her mother seems to be suffering for it, at any rate. And so good-by to Mrs. Milroy — and heaven defend me from any more last glimpses at the cottage seen through the medium of my landlady's spectacles!

"*Nine o'clock.*— Bashwood has just left me, having come with news from the great house. Pedgift the younger has made his attempt at bringing about a reconciliation this very day, and has failed. I am the sole cause of the failure. Armadale is quite willing to be reconciled, if Pedgift the elder will avoid all future occasion of disagreement between them, by never recurring to the subject of Miss Gwilt. This,

however, happens to be exactly the condition which Pedgift's father —with his opinion of me and my doings — would consider it his duty to Armadale *not* to accept. So lawyer and client remain as far apart as ever, and the obstacle of the Pedgifts is cleared out of my way.

"It might have been a very awkward obstacle, so far as Pedgift the elder is concerned, if one of his suggestions had been carried out — I mean, if an officer of the London police had been brought down here to look at me. It is a question, even now, whether I had better not take to the thick veil again, which I always wear in London and other large places. The only difficulty is, that it would excite remark in this inquisitive little town to see me wearing a thick veil, for the first time, in the summer weather.

"It is close on ten o'clock—I have been dawdling over my diary longer than I supposed.

"No words can describe how weary and languid I feel. Why don't I take my sleeping drops and go to bed? There is no meeting between Armadale and Miss Milroy to force me into early rising to-morrow morning. Am I trying, for the hundredth time, to see my way clearly into the future — trying, in my present state of fatigue, to be the quick-witted woman I once was, before all these anxieties came together and overpowered me? or am I perversely afraid of my bed when I want it most? I don't know — I am tired and miserable; I am looking wretchedly haggard and old. With a little encouragement, I might be fool enough to burst out crying. Luckily, there is no one to encourage me. What sort of night is it, I wonder?

"A cloudy night, with the moon showing at inter-

vals, and the wind rising. I can just hear it moaning among the ins and outs of the unfinished cottages at the end of the street. My nerves must be a little shaken, I think. I was startled just now by a shadow on the wall. It was only after a moment or two that I mustered sense enough to notice where the candle was, and to see that the shadow was my own.

"Shadows remind me of Midwinter — or, if the shadows don't, something else does. I must have another look at his letter, and then I will positively go to bed.

"I shall end in getting fond of him. If I remain much longer in this lonely uncertain state — so irresolute, so unlike my usual self — I shall end in getting fond of him. What madness! As if *I* could ever be really fond of a man again!

"Suppose I took one of my sudden resolutions, and married him. Poor as he is, he would give me a name and a position, if I became his wife. Let me see how the name — his own name — would look, if I really did consent to take it for mine.

"'Mrs. Armadale!' Pretty.

"'Mrs. Allan Armadale!' Prettier still.

"My nerves *must* be shaken. Here is my own handwriting startling me now! It is so strange — it is enough to startle anybody. The similarity in the two names never struck me in this light before. Marry which of the two I might, my name would of course be the same. I should have been Mrs. Armadale, if I had married the light-haired Allan at the great house. And I can be Mrs. Armadale still, if I marry the dark-haired Allan in London. It's almost

maddening to write it down — to feel that something ought to come of it — and to find nothing come.

"How *can* anything come of it? If I did go to London, and marry him (as of course I must marry him) under his real name, would he let me be known by it afterwards? With all his reasons for concealing his real name, he would insist — no, he is too fond of me to do that — he would entreat me to take the name which he has assumed. Mrs. Midwinter. Hideous! Ozias, too, when I wanted to address him familiarly as his wife should. Worse than hideous!

"And yet, there would be some reason for humouring him in this, if he asked me.

"Suppose the brute at the great house happened to leave this neighbourhood as a single man; and suppose, in his absence, any of the people who know him heard of a Mrs. Allan Armadale, they would set her down at once as his wife. Even if they actually saw me — if I actually came among them with that name, and if he was not present to contradict it — his own servants would be the first to say, 'We knew she would marry him after all!' And my lady-patronesses, who will be ready to believe anything of me now we have quarrelled, would join the chorus *sotto voce:* — 'Only think, my dear, the report that so shocked us, actually turns out to be true!' No. if I marry Midwinter, I must either be perpetually putting my husband and myself in a false position — or I must leave his real name, his pretty, romantic name, behind me at the church door.

"My husband! As if I was really going to marry him! I am *not* going to marry him, and there's an end of it.

"*Half-past ten.* — Oh dear! oh dear! how my temples throb, and how hot my weary eyes feel! There

is the moon looking at me through the window. How fast the little scattered clouds are flying before the wind! Now they let the moon in; and now they shut the moon out. What strange shapes the patches of yellow light take, and lose again, all in a moment! No peace and quiet for me, look where I may. The candle keeps flickering, and the very sky itself is restless to-night.

"'To bed! to bed!' as Lady Macbeth says. I wonder by-the-by what Lady Macbeth would have done in my position? She would have killed somebody when her difficulties first began. Probably Armadale.

"*Friday morning.* — A night's rest, thanks again to my Drops. I went to breakfast in better spirits, and received a morning welcome in the shape of a letter from Mrs. Oldershaw.

"My silence has produced its effect on Mother Jezebel. She attributes it to the right cause, and she shows her claws at last. If I am not in a position to pay my note-of-hand for thirty pounds, which is due on Tuesday next, her lawyer is instructed to 'take the usual course.' *If* I am not in a position to pay it! Why, when I have settled to-day with my landlord, I shall have barely five pounds left! There is not the shadow of a prospect between now and Tuesday of my earning any money; and I don't possess a friend in this place who would trust me with sixpence. The difficulties that are swarming round me wanted but one more to complete them, and that one has come.

"Midwinter would assist me, of course, if I could bring myself to ask him for assistance. But *that* means marrying him. Am I really desperate enough and helpless enough to end it in that way? No; not yet.

"My head feels heavy; I must get out into the fresh air, and think about it.

"*Two o'clock.* — I believe I have caught the infection of Midwinter's superstition. I begin to think that events are forcing me nearer and nearer to some end which I don't see yet, but which I am firmly persuaded is now not far off.

"I have been insulted — deliberately insulted before witnesses — by Miss Milroy.

"After walking, as usual, in the most unfrequented place I could pick out, and after trying not very successfully to think to some good purpose of what I am to do next, I remembered that I needed some note-paper and pens, and went back to the town, to the stationer's shop. It might have been wiser to have sent for what I wanted. But I was weary of myself, and weary of my lonely rooms; and I did my own errand, for no better reason than that it was something to do.

"I had just got into the shop, and was asking for what I wanted, when another customer came in. We both looked up, and recognized each other at the same moment: Miss Milroy.

"A woman and a lad were behind the counter, besides the man who was serving me. The woman civilly addressed the new customer. 'What can we have the pleasure of doing for you, Miss?' After pointing it first, by looking me straight in the face, she answered, 'Nothing, thank you, at present. I'll come back when the shop is empty.'

"She went out. The three people in the shop looked at me in silence. In silence, on my side, I paid for my purchases, and left the place. I don't know how I might have felt if I had been in my usual spirits.

In the anxious unsettled state I am in now, I can't deny it, the girl stung me.

"In the weakness of the moment (for it was nothing else) I was on the point of matching her petty spitefulness by spitefulness quite as petty on my side. I had actually got as far as the whole length of the street, on my way to the major's cottage, bent on telling him the secret of his daughter's morning walks, before my better sense came back to me. When I did cool down, I turned round at once, and took the way home. No, no, Miss Milroy: mere temporary mischief-making at the cottage, which would only end in your father forgiving you, and in Armadale profiting by his indulgence, will nothing like pay the debt I owe you. I don't forget that your heart is set on Armadale; and that the major, however he may talk, has always ended hitherto in giving you your own way. My head *may* be getting duller and duller, but it has not quite failed me yet.

"In the meantime, there is Mother Oldershaw's letter waiting obstinately to be answered; and here am I, not knowing what to do about it yet. Shall I answer it or not? It doesn't matter for the present; there are some hours still to spare before the post goes out.

"Suppose I asked Armadale to lend me the money? I should enjoy getting *something* out of him; and I believe, in his present situation with Miss Milroy, he would do anything to be rid of me. Mean enough this, on my part. Pooh! When you hate and despise a man, as I hate and despise Armadale, who cares for looking mean in *his* eyes?

"And yet my pride — or my something else, I don't know what — shrinks from it.

"Half-past two — only half-past two. Oh, the

dreadful weariness of these long summer days! I can't keep thinking and thinking any longer; I must do something to relieve my mind. Can I go to my piano? No; I'm not fit for it. Work? No; I shall get thinking again if I take to my needle. A man, in my place, would find refuge in drink. I'm not a man, and I can't drink. I'll dawdle over my dresses, and put my things tidy.

* * * * * *

"Has an hour passed? More than an hour. It seems like a minute.

"I can't look back through these leaves, but I know I wrote somewhere that I felt myself getting nearer and nearer to some end that was still hidden from me. The end is hidden no longer. The cloud is off my mind, the blindness has gone from my eyes. I see it! I see it!

"It came to me — I never sought it. If I was lying on my deathbed, I could swear, with a safe conscience, I never sought it.

"I was only looking over my things; I was as idly and as frivolously employed as the most idle and most frivolous woman living. I went through my dresses and my linen. What could be more innocent? Children go through their dresses and their linen.

"It was such a long summer day, and I was so tired of myself. I went to my boxes next. I looked over the large box first, which I usually leave open; and then I tried the small box, which I always keep locked.

"From one thing to the other, I came at last to the bundle of letters at the bottom — the letters of the man for whom I once sacrificed and suffered everything; the man who has made me what I am. A hundred times I had determined to burn his letters;

but I have never burnt them. This time, all I said was, 'I won't read his letters!' And I did read them.

"The villain — the false, cowardly, heartless villain — what have I to do with his letters now? Oh, the misery of being a woman! Oh, the meanness that our memory of a man can tempt us to, when our love for him is dead and gone! I read the letters — I was so lonely and so miserable, I read the letters.

"I came to the last — the letter he wrote to encourage me, when I hesitated as the terrible time came nearer and nearer; the letter that revived me when my resolution failed at the eleventh hour. I read on, line after line, till I came to these words: —

". . . . I really have no patience with such absurdities as you have written to me. You say I am driving you on to do what is beyond a woman's courage. Am I? I might refer you to any collection of Trials, English or foreign, to show that you were utterly wrong. But such collections may be beyond your reach; and I will only refer you to a case in yesterday's newspaper. The circumstances are totally different from *our* circumstances; but the example of resolution in a woman is an example worth your notice.

"You will find, among the law reports, a married woman charged with fraudulently representing herself to be the missing widow of an officer in the merchant service, who was supposed to have been drowned. The name of the prisoner's husband (living), and the name of the officer (a very common one, both as to Christian and surname), happened to be identically the same. There was money to be got by it (sorely wanted by the prisoner's husband, to whom she was devotedly attached), if the fraud had succeeded. The woman took it all on herself. Her husband was helpless and ill, and the bailiffs were after him. The circumstances, as you may read for yourself, were all in her favour, and were so well managed by her that the lawyers themselves acknowledged she might have succeeded, if the supposed drowned man had not turned up alive and well in the nick of time to confront her. The scene took place at the lawyers' office, and came out in the evidence at the police-court. The woman was handsome, and the sailor was a good-natured man. He wanted, at first, if the lawyers would have allowed him, to let her off. He said to her, among other things, 'You didn't count on the drowned man coming back, alive and hearty, did you, ma'am?' 'It's lucky for you,' she said, 'I didn't count on it. You have escaped the sea, but you wouldn't have escaped *me*.' 'Why, what would you have done, if you *had* known I was coming back?' says the sailor. She looked him steadily in the face, and answered: — 'I would have killed you.' There! Do you think such a woman as that would have written to tell me I was pressing her farther than she had courage to go? A handsome woman, too, like yourself. You would drive some men in my position to wish they had her now in your place.

"I read no farther. When I had got on, line by line, to those words, it burst on me like a flash of lightning. In an instant I saw it as plainly as I see it now. It is horrible, it is unheard-of, it out-dares all daring; but, if I can only nerve myself to face one terrible necessity, it is to be done. *I may personate the richly-provided widow of Allan Armadale of Thorpe-Ambrose, if I can count on Allan Armadale's death in a given time.*

"There, in plain words, is the frightful temptation under which I now feel myself sinking. It is frightful in more ways than one — for it has come straight out of that other temptation to which I yielded in the by-gone time.

"Yes; there the letter has been waiting for me in my box, to serve a purpose never thought of by the villain who wrote it. There is the Case, as he calls it — only quoted to taunt me; utterly unlike my own case at the time — there it has been, waiting and lurking for me through all the changes in my life, till it has come to be like *my* case at last.

"It might startle any woman to see this, and even this is not the worst. The whole thing has been in my Diary, for days past, without my knowing it! Every idle fancy that escaped me, has been tending secretly that one way! And I never saw, never suspected it, till the reading of the letter put my own thoughts before me in a new light — till I saw the shadow of my own circumstances suddenly reflected in one special circumstance of that other woman's case!

"It is to be done, if I can but look the necessity in the face. It is to be done *if I can count on Allan Armadale's death in a given time.*

"All but his death is easy. The whole series of events under which I have been blindly chafing and fretting for more than a week past, have been one and all — though I was too stupid to see it — events in my favour; events paving the way smoothly and more smoothly straight to the end.

"In three bold steps — only three! — that end might be reached. Let Midwinter marry me privately, under his real name — step the first! Let Armadale leave Thorpe-Ambrose a single man, and die in some distant place among strangers — step the second!

"Why am I hesitating? Why not go on to step the third, and last?

"I *will* go on. Step the third, and last, is my appearance, after the announcement of Armadale's death has reached this neighbourhood, in the character of Armadale's widow, with my marriage certificate in my hand to prove my claim. It is as clear as the sun at noonday. Thanks to the exact similarity between the two names, and thanks to the careful manner in which the secret of that similarity has been kept, I may be the wife of the dark Allan Armadale, known as such to nobody but my husband and myself; and I may, out of that very position, claim the character of widow of the light Allan Armadale, with proof to support me (in the shape of my marriage certificate) which would be proof in the estimation of the most incredulous person living.

"To think of my having put all this in my Diary! To think of my having actually contemplated this very situation, and having seen nothing more in it, at the time, than a reason (if I married Midwinter) for consenting to appear in the world under my husband's assumed name!

"What is it daunts me? The dread of obstacles? The fear of discovery?

"Where are the obstacles? where is the fear of discovery?

"I am actually suspected all over the neighbourhood, of intriguing to be mistress of Thorpe-Ambrose. I am the only person who knows the real turn that Armadale's inclinations have taken. Not a creature but myself is as yet aware of his early morning meetings with Miss Milroy. If it is necessary to part them, I can do it at any moment, by an anonymous line to the major. If it is necessary to remove Armadale from Thorpe-Ambrose, I can get him away at three day's notice. His own lips informed me, when I last spoke to him, that he would go to the ends of the earth to be friends again with Midwinter, if Midwinter would let him. I have only to tell Midwinter to write from London, and ask to be reconciled; and Midwinter would obey me — and to London Armadale would go. Every difficulty, at starting, is smoothed over ready to my hand. Every after-difficulty I could manage for myself. In the whole venture — desperate as it looks to pass myself off for the widow of one man, while I am all the while the wife of the other — there is absolutely no necessity that wants twice considering, but the one terrible necessity of Armadale's death.

"His death! It might be a terrible necessity to any other woman — but is it, ought it to be terrible to Me?

"I hate him for his mother's sake. I hate him for his own sake. I hate him for going to London behind my back, and making inquiries about me. I hate him for forcing me out of my situation before I wanted to go. I hate him for destroying all my hopes of marrying him, and throwing me back helpless on my own

miserable life. But, oh, after what I have done already in the past time, how can I? how can I?

"The girl, too — the girl who has come between us; who has taken him away from me; who has openly insulted me this very day — how the girl whose heart is set on him would feel it, if he died! What a vengeance on *her*, if I did it! And when I was received as Armadale's widow, what a triumph for *me*. Triumph! It is more than triumph — it is the salvation of me. A name that can't be assailed, a station that can't be assailed, to hide myself in from my past life! Comfort, luxury, wealth! An income of twelve hundred a year secured to me — secured by a will which has been looked at by a lawyer; secured independently of anything Armadale can say or do himself! I never had twelve hundred a year. At my luckiest time, I never had half as much, really my own. What have I got now? Just five pounds left in the world — and the prospect next week of a debtor's prison.

"But oh, after what I have done already in the past time, how can I? how can I?

"Some women — in my place, and with my recollections to look back on — would feel it differently. Some women would say — 'It's easier the second time than the first.' Why can't I? why can't I?

"Oh, you Devil tempting me, is there no Angel near, to raise some timely obstacle between this and to-morrow, which might help me to give it up?

"I shall sink under it — I shall sink, if I write or think of it any more! I'll shut up these leaves and go out again. I'll get some common person to come with me, and we will talk of common things. I'll take out the woman of the house, and her children. We will go and see something. There is a show of some

kind in the town — I'll treat them to it. I'm not such an ill-natured woman when I try; and the landlady has really been kind to me. Surely I might occupy my mind a little, in seeing her and her children enjoying themselves.

"A minute since, I shut up these leaves as I said I would; and now I have opened them again, I don't know why. I think my brain is turned. I feel as if something was lost out of my mind; I feel as if I ought to find it here.

"I have found it! *Midwinter!!!*

"Is it possible that I can have been thinking of the reasons For and Against, for an hour past — writing Midwinter's name over and over again — speculating seriously on marrying him — and all the time not once remembering that, even with every other impediment removed, *he* alone, when the time came, would be an insurmountable obstacle in my way? Has the effort to face the consideration of Armadale's death absorbed me to *that* degree? I suppose it has. I can't account for such extraordinary forgetfulness on my part, in any other way.

"Shall I stop and think it out, as I have thought out all the rest? Shall I ask myself if the obstacle of Midwinter would after all, when the time came, be the unmanageable obstacle that it looks at present? No! What need is there to think of it? I have made up my mind to get the better of the temptation. I have made up my mind to give my landlady and her children a treat; I have made up my mind to close my Diary. And closed it shall be.

"*Six o'clock.* — The landlady's gossip is unendurable; the landlady's children distract me. I have left

them, to run back here before post-time and write a line to Mrs. Oldershaw.

"The dread that I shall sink under the temptation has grown stronger and stronger on me. I have determined to put it beyond my power to have my own way and follow my own will. Mother Oldershaw shall be the salvation of me for the first time since I have known her. If I can't pay my note-of-hand, she threatens me with an arrest. Well, she *shall* arrest me. In the state my mind is in now, the best thing that can happen to me is to be taken away from Thorpe-Ambrose, whether I like it or not. I will write and say that I am to be found here. I will write and tell her, in so many words, that the best service she can render me is to lock me up.

"*Seven o'clock.* — The letter has gone to the post. I had begun to feel a little easier, when the children came in to thank me for taking them to the show. One of them is a girl, and the girl upset me. She is a forward child, and her hair is nearly the colour of mine. She said, 'I shall be like you when I have grown bigger, shan't I?' Her idiot of a mother said, 'Please to excuse her, miss,' and took her out of the room, laughing. Like me! I don't pretend to be fond of the child — but think of her being like Me!

"*Saturday morning.* — I have done well for once in acting on impulse, and writing as I did to Mrs. Oldershaw. The only new circumstance that has happened, is another circumstance in my favour!

"Major Milroy has answered Armadale's letter, entreating permission to call at the cottage, and justify himself. His daughter read it in silence, when Armadale handed it to her at their meeting this morning, in

the park. But they talked about it afterwards, loud enough for me to hear them. The major persists in the course he has taken. He says his opinion of Armadale's conduct has been formed, not on common report, but on Armadale's own letters, and he sees no reason to alter the conclusion at which he arrived when the correspondence between them was closed.

"This little matter had, I confess, slipped out of my memory. It might have ended awkwardly for *me*. If Major Milroy had been less obstinately wedded to his own opinion, Armadale might have justified himself; the marriage engagement might have been acknowledged; and all *my* power of influencing the matter might have been at an end. As it is, they must continue to keep the engagement strictly secret; and Miss Milroy, who has never ventured herself near the great house since the thunderstorm forced her into it for shelter, will be less likely than ever to venture there now. I can part them when I please; with an anonymous line to the major, I can part them when I please!

"After having discussed the letter, the talk between them turned on what they were to do next. Major Milroy's severity, as it soon appeared, produced the usual results. Armadale returned to the subject of the elopement — and this time she listened to him. There is everything to drive her to it. Her outfit of clothes is nearly ready; and the summer holidays, at the school which has been chosen for her, end at the end of next week. When I left them, they had decided to meet again and settle something on Monday.

"The last words I heard him address to her, before I went away, shook me a little. He said: 'There is one difficulty, Neelie, that needn't trouble us, at any rate. I have got plenty of money.' And then he kissed

her. The way to his life began to look an easier way to me when he talked of his money, and kissed her.

"Some hours have passed, and the more I think of it, the more I fear the blank interval between this time and the time when Mrs. Oldershaw calls in the law, and protects me against myself. It might have been better if I had stopped at home this morning. But how could I? After the insult she offered me yesterday, I tingled all over to go and look at her.

"To-day; Sunday; Monday; Tuesday. They can't arrest me for the money before Wednesday. And my miserable five pounds are dwindling to four! And he told her he had plenty of money! And she blushed and trembled when he kissed her. It might have been better for him, better for her, and better for me, if my debt had fallen due yesterday, and if the bailiffs had their hands on me at this moment.

"Suppose I had the means of leaving Thorpe-Ambrose by the next train, and going somewhere abroad, and absorbing myself in some new interest, among new people. Could I do it, rather than look again at that easy way to his life which would smooth the way to everything else?

"Perhaps I might. But where is the money to come from? Surely some way of getting it struck me a day or two since? Yes; that mean idea of asking Armadale to help me! Well; I *will* be mean for once. I'll give him the chance of making a generous use of that well-filled purse which it is such a comfort to him to reflect on in his present circumstances. It would soften my heart towards any man if he lent me money in my present extremity; and if Armadale lends me money, it might soften my heart towards *him*. When

shall I go? At once! I won't give myself time to feel the degradation of it, and to change my mind.

"*Three o'clock.* — I mark the hour. He has sealed his own doom. He has insulted me.

"Yes! I have suffered it once from Miss Milroy. And I have now suffered it a second time from Armadale himself. An insult — a marked, merciless, deliberate insult in the open day!

"I had got through the town, and had advanced a few hundred yards along the road that leads to the great house when I saw Armadale, at a little distance, coming towards me. He was walking fast — evidently with some errand of his own to take him to the town. The instant he caught sight of me he stopped, coloured up, took off his hat, hesitated, and turned aside down a lane behind him, which I happen to know would take him exactly in the contrary direction to the direction in which he was walking when he first saw me. His conduct said in so many words, 'Miss Milroy may hear of it; I daren't run the risk of being seen speaking to you.' Men have used me heartlessly; men have done and said hard things to me — but no man living ever yet treated me as if I was plague-struck, and as if the very air about me was infected by my presence!

"I say no more. When he walked away from me down that lane, he walked to his death. I have written to Midwinter to expect me in London next week, and to be ready for our marriage soon afterwards.

"*Four o'clock.* — Half-an-hour since, I put on my bonnet to go out and post the letter to Midwinter myself. And here I am, still in my room, with my mind torn by doubts, and my letter on the table.

"Armadale counts for nothing in the perplexities

that are now torturing me. It is Midwinter who makes me hesitate. Can I take the first of those three steps that lead me to the end, without the common caution of looking at consequences? Can I marry Midwinter, without knowing beforehand how to meet the obstacle of my husband, when the time comes which transforms me from the living Armadale's wife, to the dead Armadale's widow.

"Why can't I think of it, when I know I *must* think of it? Why can't I look at it as steadily as I have looked at all the rest? I feel his kisses on my lips; I feel his tears on my bosom; I feel his arms round me again. He is far away in London — and yet, he is here and won't let me think of it!

"Why can't I wait a little? Why can't I let Time help me? Time? It's Saturday! What need is there to think of it, unless I like? There is no post to London to-day. I *must* wait. If I posted the letter it wouldn't go. Besides, to-morrow I may hear from Mrs. Oldershaw. I ought to wait to hear from Mrs. Oldershaw. I can't consider myself a free woman till I know what Mrs. Oldershaw means to do. There is a necessity for waiting till to-morrow. I shall take my bonnet off, and lock the letter up in my desk.

"*Sunday morning.* — There is no resisting it! One after another the circumstances crowd on me. They come thicker and thicker, and they all force me one way.

"I have got Mother Oldershaw's answer. The wretch fawns on me, and cringes to me. I can see, as plainly as if she had acknowledged it, that she suspects me of seeing my own way to success at Thorpe-Ambrose without her assistance. Having found threatening me useless, she tries coaxing me now. I am her

darling Lydia again! She is quite shocked that I could imagine she ever really intended to arrest her bosom friend — and she has only to entreat me, as a favour to herself, to renew the bill!

"I say once more, no mortal creature could resist it! Time after time I have tried to escape the temptation; and time after time the circumstances drive me back again. I can struggle no longer. The post that takes the letters to-night shall take my letter to Midwinter among the rest.

"To-night! If I give myself till to-night, something else may happen. If I give myself till to-night, I may hesitate again. I'm weary of the torture of hesitating. I must and will have relief in the present, cost what it may in the future. My letter to Midwinter will drive me mad if I see it staring and staring at me in my desk any longer. I can post it in ten minutes' time — and I will!

"It is done. The first of the three steps that lead me to the end, is a step taken. My mind is quieter — the letter is in the post.

"By to-morrow, Midwinter will receive it. Before the end of the week, Armadale must be publicly seen to leave Thorpe-Ambrose; and I must be publicly seen to leave with him.

"Have I looked at the consequences of my marriage to Midwinter? No! Do I know how to meet the obstacle of my husband, when the time comes which transforms me from the living Armadale's wife, to the dead Armadale's widow?

"No! When the time comes, I must meet the obstacle as I best may. I am going blindfold then — so far as Midwinter is concerned — into this frightful risk? Yes; blindfold. Am I out of my senses? Very

likely. Or am I a little too fond of him to look the thing in the face? I daresay. Who cares?

"I won't, I won't, I won't think of it! Haven't I a will of my own? And can't I think, if I like, of something else?

"Here is Mother Jezebel's cringing letter. *That* is something else to think of. I'll answer it. I am in a fine humour for writing to Mother Jezebel.

* * * * *

Conclusion of Miss Gwilt's Letter to Mrs. Oldershaw.

". I told you, when I broke off, that I would wait before I finished this, and ask my Diary if I could safely tell you what I have now got it in my mind to do. Well, I have asked; and my Diary says, 'Don't tell her!' Under these circumstances, I close my letter — with my best excuses for leaving you in the dark.

"I shall probably be in London before long — and I may tell you by word of mouth what I don't think it safe to write here. Mind, I make no promise! It all depends on how I feel towards you at the time. I don't doubt your discretion — but (under certain circumstances) I am not so sure of your courage.

"L. G."

"P. S. — My best thanks for your permission to renew the bill. I decline profiting by the proposal. The money will be ready, when the money its due. I have a friend now in London who will pay it, if I ask him. Do you wonder who the friend is? You will wonder at one or two other things, Mrs. Oldershaw, before many weeks more are over your head and mine."

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